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**The American University in Cairo  
School of Humanities and Sciences**

**Positioning of the Other and Identity of the Self  
Revealed in Richard Wright's *Black Power*: A  
Critical Discourse Analysis**

**A Thesis Submitted to  
The Department of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages  
(TESOL)**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts**

under the supervision of Dr. Amira Agameya

**By  
Nicholas Francesco  
May 2017**

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to the countless number of educators, administrators, advisors, mentors and peers involved in my long educational journey over the past 25 years at A.L. Fitzpatrick Elementary School, St. Martha's Elementary School, Benjamin Rush Middle School, St. Joseph's Preparatory High School, The University of Pittsburgh, Temple University, and The American University in Cairo that have inspired a true love of literature and sparked a passion for teaching which I carry with me wherever I happen to find myself in the world.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I'd like to use this section to thank all of those involved with the process of this thesis while at AUC, most notably my advisor and first reader Dr. Amira Agameya who served as a steadying and constant presence throughout my entire time at the university. My second reader Dr. Reem Bassiouney provided invaluable insight on language use and identity and helped to ground the paper in linguistics no matter how hard I tried to do otherwise. My third reader Dr. Atta Gebril prepared me for the journey over my first two semesters, and was fittingly involved in the final steps. Also, Dr. Marilyn Plumlee provided invaluable assistance during the process with recommendations and sources.

I'd also like to thank my mother and father for helping to facilitate the best possible educational experiences over the course of my life, culminating in and hopefully continuing to build off of this study.

To all other friends and family who've been along for the ride in one way or another across four continents I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

## ABSTRACT

This study was conducted in order to examine the language choices made in Richard Wright's *Black Power* and process how language was used to identify Africans/Africa as the Other and identify Richard Wright himself in the midst of such otherness. In the field of travel writing, this account, detailing time the travel and time spent in The Gold Coast in 1953 resides as one of the most significant works in the genre by one of the best known African-American writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For this memoir, the overwhelming strength of some of the lexical choices made by Wright lends itself for a deeper interpretation of the objects being described along with finding one's own self. Using a Systemic Functional Linguistic approach within the area of Critical Discourse Analysis, I closely examined the text for applicable terms which would provide insight into both the Other and the self detailed in the text. Terms such as *distance*, *primitive*, *strange*, and *morality*, along with descriptions of African bodies contributed to the projected image of the Other. To identify the self, *heritage* and *descent* were examined along with conversations Wright had with locals and terms used to show confusion with one's surroundings. From the excerpts gathered, it became clear that Wright was extremely judgmental and critical of both Africa and the Africans he came across, so much so that they were positioned very differently than Wright himself, despite common ancestral ties. At the same time, Wright attempted to better define a major marker of his own personal identity in the land of a problematic identifying term, the African in African-American. The findings shed light on a complex issue among American members of the African diaspora in attempts to assess the role of Africa and its people for those who can trace their lineage back to the continent, yet don't have direct contact and access to the culture, and are commonly identified by the Africanness in their bloodline.

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## **Abbreviations and Terms**

**CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis**

**SFL: Systemic Functional Linguistics**

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

They face each other, the Negro and the African, over a gulf of three hundred years – an alienation too vast to be conquered in an evening's goodwill, too heavy and too double-edged even to be trapped in speech. - James Baldwin (qtd. in *Kinship*, p.1)

The relationship between Africans and African-Americans is an extensive and convoluted bond, shaped largely by events beginning in the 17th century when Africa and its inhabitants comprised the core of the international slave trade, a practice which would then stretch over more than three hundred years. At the root of the controversial relationship is the notion that Africans sold out their fellow countrymen – essentially profiting of the loss of their freedom – to the Europeans who in turn forcefully delivered them into different degrees of bondage across the world.

The major corollary of the African slave trade was, and continued to be reflected in a physical, emotional, and spiritual wound that has festered in the psyche of African-Americans, mutating over generations into problematical feelings of hatred, confusion and anguish which have powerfully manipulated African African-American relations. Through the forceful tearing of millions from the fabric of the African homeland and shipping them across a five thousand mile divide, the two factions have slowly evolved into societies and cultures markedly different from when they were first split.

The truths of slavery are more intricate the simple generalization of “you (Africans) sold us (African-Americans),” and in the context of this paper deserves to be examined in closer detail along with the ramifications of such a statement. Though this examination of African-

American identity within the context of Africa does not delve deeply into the origins and practices of slavery itself, because frankly that topic deserves its own focus, the importance of the perceptions still held today regarding the beginning of the African slave trade cannot be understated. The prevailing stance on the causes of slavery amongst much of the African-American community is unfortunately based largely on the erroneous, generalized beliefs of prior generations. While it is true that Africans sold fellow Africans to the Europeans, there were a multitude of factors involved. For our purposes, one of the biggest was the stance held regarding owning slaves by many Africans at the time because of the tribal (specifically not nation-based) nature of the land.

The sad irony of blacks selling blacks never slowed the African merchant's determination to do business with the Europeans, since tribal distinctions meant much more than racial ones. And he [Africans] considered his involvement limited, failing to realize that he was an essential part of an enterprise that would make men wealthier than he could ever imagine. (Johnson et al., 1998: 65)

Within a tribal-based society, the purchasing and selling of people was a notion many were comfortable with in Africa at the time. Based largely on capturing one's enemies and delivering them into bondage, it was also not a rare occurrence to own slaves personally. Lines were not drawn across racial borders as they are today.

Certainly, African tribes who sold their own people stood to profit tremendously from the venture with the Europeans. This practice allowed certain tribes to grow more powerful politically and economically than originally thought possible (Johnson et al., 1998). As seen countless times over the course of world history, greed was a chief motivating factor. The actions

of the African tribes involved were indeed abominable and directly helped to foster a practice which would unequivocally fracture the foundation of the African culture forever. Johnson et al. further note the worst repercussion of slavery for Africans with the claim that,

“[. . .] the most frightening effect was the irreparable tear in the fabric of African custom and tradition. Men, women and children were captured and pulled farther and farther away from the history and nurturing of each tribe. And they had, as far as they could see, no future.” (1998: 65-66)

Generations of bondage in America intensely shaped the lives of the newfound African-Americans, and created long-lasting ramifications that are still heavily felt today, nearly 150 years after the United States became the last world superpower to eradicate slavery. Tales of rape, hangings, brutal beatings, and more are all too common from this dark period in American history. Truth be told, even with the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation during the Civil War, and the universal freedom given to African-Americans in its aftermath, to say that blacks in America were facing an uphill battle would be a mass understatement. Many Southerners (and Northerners) still held African-Americans in grave contempt, and often times viewed them as inferior if not subhuman altogether, based primarily on their African ancestry.

Beyond placing the blame on white society in the U.S. for perpetuating slavery's countless cruelties, many African-Americans looked back at those who remained in the African homeland as culprits in these heinous offenses. Since the final elimination of this brutal practice, the relationship between African-Americans and Africans has been largely forged under this mindset, with the raw emotion from this historical trauma serving as one of the main contributors to its contentious nature. Nevertheless, despite earlier betrayals, Africa itself served as a beacon

of hope in these dark and desolate times as a land far away from chattel slavery. It was a land full of people with similar (at least based on appearance) physical characteristics, a distinct difference from in the U.S., where they would presumably not be judged on the color of their skin alone (Smith, 2009).

The struggle for equal rights in America was a fight waged for the better part of a hundred years after abolition, largely culminating in the 1950's and 60's with prominent figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, to name a few. Prior to this time segregation was practiced on a widespread basis in many areas of the country, and African-Americans were forced to fight tooth and nail for any modicum of respect in a largely Caucasian-ruled society. Even in the years after the Civil Rights movement, racial tensions have continued to shape American society, forming an undercurrent that affects African-Americans in many aspects of their lives to this day.

Despite the forced division due to slavery, the idea of Africa never left the collective consciousness of would-be slaves and their descendants coming across the Atlantic. Nearly as soon as they were taken away on ships bound for America, the idea of a return home was embedded as an opportunity to find one's identity and affirm the link the Africa (Appiah, 1988; Smith, 2009). There have also been occasional calls for members on both sides of the Atlantic to reunite as one to create a stronger, more powerful group than two forged by fracture and strife.

Only Africans can take responsibility for redeeming Africa; only African Americans can uplift black America. But by linking these two front in a single black battle for worldwide empowerment, we can tap our most valuable resource – the incredible human potential of our sheer weight in numbers; the children of Africa have spread throughout the world and

stand more than a billion strong, to update [Marcus] Garvey. By standing together and reaching out to one another there is much we have accomplished throughout history. But so much remains to be done. (Wamba 333)

As international travel became available to the masses in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, this vision of an attempted unification became more of a tangible reality. Since this time, African-Americans have been making the trek back to the land of their ancestors, attempting to piece together what has become known as the “African Diaspora” (Drake, 1975). These travelers, seeking to reunite in some fashion with Africa, come full of expectations that they will be warmly welcomed and successfully transition into African culture (Meriwether, 2002; Okpewho, 2001; Reilly, 1982). These interactions with native Africans have been reflected in the writings of many of the seminal African-American authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In these accounts, African-Americans find themselves faced with a multitude of complex questions revolving around Africa and what it means to them. In this paper, I have shown how Richard Wright approaches this issue in his memoir *Black Power*, and if expectations are met. Appiah (1988) notes Wright’s questions from the outset of the text:

For he (Wright) asks immediately 'But am I African?'; and goes on to wonder how he will feel in the presence of someone whose ancestors might have sold his ancestors into slavery -- to wonder, we might say, if he can feel African -- and then to ask how 'the Africans' will think of him. (Appiah: 179)

The remnants of slavery’s legacy resonate into the modern day as the Wright found himself unable to comprehend the prevalence of a tribal (and not color based) Africa. Reminded time and again in America of their blackness, and being discriminated on because of it their whole lives,

this is concept which is extremely difficult to comprehend for most African-Americans (Abrahams, 1960). Blackness serves as a core component of identity for many African-Americans. Blackness is so important that when they see others of a similar skin color (Africans), there is the presumption of a connection. When this connection is not met, Wright finds himself lost, in the position of an outsider (Campbell, 2003).

When expectations do fall short, and African-Americans come face to face with Africa/Africans that they are unable to make the connection they so desperately yearn for, oftentimes one does not attribute this disappointment on the self, instead focusing on the other party and their differences which have prevented a connection. This is where positioning of the other occurs, in that Wright attributes the disconnect between the two sides to the differences of Africa/Africans he encounters during his time in The Gold Coast. Davies and Harré (1990) cite positioning of another as interactive positioning, whereby the speaker's choice of words position the other. Wright performs this process routinely during his time abroad. Furthermore, Cresswell (2012) notes, that while one does not approach a social situation with a particular dialogue in mind, there is a broad sense of expectation on how the interaction should develop. In this way, Wright (along with many other African-American travel writers) expected something from Africa and its people, but problematically they did not know what exactly that had hoped to occur.

### **Research Problem**

The physical continent of Africa is more than simply a far off land for African-Americans. It quite literally constitutes half of a major identifier for this group of people. While this group has presumably spent their formative life in America, formulating what this means to them as they

mature, the African aspect is clouded in mystery. Even though the physical appearance may appear similar to the naked eye for both sides (a major identifier for African-Americans), Africans do not view this outward characteristic with the same importance. But that's where the similarities stop and the crucial differences begin. Centuries apart have created a sharp divide in ancestral characteristics and have left a gulf as wide as the Atlantic in regards to cultural identity. African-Americans, Wright included, have become Westerners, influenced by the ways of this perceived first world culture. In sharp contrast, what he sees before him is primitive, plain and simple. A centuries old shared ancestry and shared skin color is not enough to bridge these differences.

Furthermore, little attention is paid to Africa in schools, with some courses choosing instead to focus on the role of slaves after they came to America. As a result, the mystery intensifies even more. "What is Africa to me?" is a question that has no easy answer, for a number of reasons which have been previously mentioned. And it isn't addressed until one chooses to make the transatlantic journey. What one experiences upon encountering Africa isn't just a passing sojourn. It harkens back to hundreds of years of history, striving to fulfill what Africa truly means within the context of one's identity. Yet the journey is often met with deep disappointment. The expectations which started so high, fall so far short of what was hoped for and expected, that oftentimes African-Americans leave the continent in despair from the entire experience. Richard Wright details this process in his memoir *Black Power*, from the seeds of the idea, all the way to the travel itself and the time spent in the Gold Coast. Through a close examination of the language used by Wright, the reader can view his shifting identity while in the midst of this tumultuous journey.



## **Research Questions**

1. What does positioning of Africa/Africans as the Other in *Black Power* reveal about Richard Wright's search for identity?
2. What linguistic features does Wright use to depict his own identity in the context of Africa and its people?

## **Theoretical Definitions**

**African Diaspora** – This term refers to the peoples around the world who are descendants from the African continent. The concept was borrowed from the idea of the Jewish Diaspora, in that members of the culture were scattered across the world, often by force. The term came into common usage in the 1950's.

**Agency** – Bamberg, De Fina, and Schiffrin (2011) delve into the area of agency versus control, in that one either constructs the world around them through their own thoughts and processes (agency) or instead is constructed in the way that the world is already constituted. On a case-by-case basis, this awareness can prove pivotal toward the active construction of one's identity. Whether or not one feels powerless to construct what is around them is magnified when in an unfamiliar environment, and can intensely manipulate the identity of the person involved.

**Identity** – Hall (1990) states that identity is not as clear and concise as commonly thought. He views identity as a production, one that is commonly in flux. Therefore, the term cultural identity is problematic, because it difficult to ascribe such an all-encompassing and static term on such a fluid concept. This sense of fluidity continues in recent research with Bamberg et al. (2011) who note three particular dimensions of identity which are problematical yet significant to identity

construction: how one assesses agency within the context of their relation to the world as well as the world to themselves, distinguishing both the self and other as a way to balance between the unique self and a sense of belonging, and the process of sameness versus change via biography.

**Positioning** – Davies and Harré (1990) spotlight the positioning not only of the speaker, but also that of the other through five speech related aspects:

- 1) particular words are chosen by the speaker which have implications of images and metaphors that presume ways of being from others involved
- 2) other participants involved are not necessarily aware of power implications and simply assume speech patterns to be normal
- 3) the particulars of the speaker's words depends on the situation and others view of said situation
- 4) as the self and other create positions, these are considered pieces of one's autobiography
- 5) positions chosen contain aspects of claimed or desired identity

More recently, Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat (2009) noted that positioning theory itself is a process which occurs in the mind, and supports the actions people undertake, and what the actions represent within a person. These actions can be taken on an everyday basis, or can be specific to a situation. They can also be taken for granted, in that it can reflect an unconscious awareness.

**Power** – Power and power relations in terms of discourse use is a recurring theme throughout much of the literature examined in this study. Renkema (2004) spotlighted power relations and ideology, which when in effect can force the other party involved to interpret reality in a

particular manner. In this way, certain discourse practices can shift the balance of power between social classes, gender, and general majorities/minorities through representation and positioning (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997 in Wodak and Meyer, 2009). More specifically, van Dijk (1996) noted that specific speech acts (commands vs requests, politeness vs curtness, turn-taking, etc.) can immediately shift power between one party or another. The various factors revolving around power also go to show how genuinely in flux it can be, even within a single conversation.

**Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)** – Halliday (1978) put forth the idea of language as a semiotic social system, in that language functions as a behavior which reflects not only upon the speaker, but can reveal the total context of how one interacts with their environment and the environment itself. More recently, Herriman (2012) placed SFL as a subcategory of discourse analysis that is focused on real-life interactions and the speech and writing produced within them. There are two types of context within this area which focus around culture/genre and situation/register. The former attends more to how language is formed in order to achieve specific ends while the latter is less formal and more casual, containing the subfields of field, tenor, and mode.

**Travel Literature** – Travel literature generally refers to authors going overseas and documenting some part of their travels. It is a relatively broad genre in this respect, and is not confined to the African-American transatlantic travel focused on in this study.

### **Operational Definitions**

**Identity** – One of the main reasons African-Americans often go to Africa is to explore how and where exactly Africa fits into their lives. Growing up in the United States, identifying as an American is ingrained from birth (though for African-Americans the discrimination they often

face also factors into this sense of identity). It is what they know and experience on a daily basis. A large part of this identity revolves around skin color and a shared darkness. But the other part of their makeup, what constitutes the African in African-American, is a much more difficult concept to actualize. Using CDA, we can view the interaction and discourse between Africans and African-Americans as a form of social practice that involves a relationship between the discourse itself and everything that frames it (situation, institution, social structure, etc.). Therefore, discourse is shaped by social factors, one of which is the identity and subsequent relationship between people and larger groups (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). In *Black Power*, Richard Wright (although not unique in this attempt) tries to fully realize what Africa represents for him, and how it may (or may not) come to redefine his identity in the presence of a society thought to be within his reach.

**Linguistic features** – Specific attention will be paid to nouns, adjectives, pronouns, articles and collocations used when Wright is both dealing directly with Africans, as well as internally reflecting upon his experiences, thusly leading to construction of his identity while in The Gold Coast. These linguistic features will help to expose the tenor of the text, and by extension the components put forth by Eggins and Slade (2005) that constitute tenor.

**Positioning** – Harré (2012) notes that generally speaking, the position one takes represents a set of beliefs concerning expectations involved in the rights and actions of others. Furthermore, they can be put forth explicitly through rules and conventions. In this way, Richard Wright holds a set of beliefs about African and Africans before, during, and after his time spent in The Gold Coast, reflecting a position-based dynamism spotlighted by Tirado and Gálvez (2007). Furthermore, the duo contend that positioning can be negotiated and even resisted according to the will of the

speaker. If we apply this to Wright, he then has the ability to manipulate and control the positioning taking place, despite potential signs to the contrary.

**Tenor** – Tenor is determined by the social roles of the people involved in a piece of communication and how the relationship between them is reflected in the language used.

Herriman (2012) points specifically to three dimensions in which tenor is manipulated: power, contact, and affective involvement. Eggins (2004) repackages tenor as mood, and points to specific structures in the language used such as clause structure, modality, vocatives, attitudinal markers, politeness, and intensification.

### **Delimitations**

The study does not look into the perception-based filter of the autobiographer on the accuracy of the events depicted. This is an entirely different matter and I will not have the time nor the space to delve into this issue. This is a topic worthy of its own study.

Additionally, this study only briefly discusses slavery from a historical perspective. The background does need to be established, mainly in the introduction to provide a sense of context, but again this is a topic which needs to be looked at on its own and not within this study.

Using the term Africa and Africans to refer to the people of The Gold Coast exclusively is problematic. The people and culture of The Gold Coast exclusively do not speak and represent all of Africa, which is an unbelievably diverse continent full of different cultures and people. In fact, this is one of the most problematic aspects of the term African-American. Africa as an ancestral identifier is vague at best and serves as a contributor to many of the identity issues raised in this study. However, this limited study does not have the time to delve into this dense, separate issue. Therefore I have focused on Wright's language throughout the memoir on the

people he sees as Africans, along with many of the sweeping generalizations made by Wright which he feels are representative of Africa.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

For many African-Americans residing in the U.S., the continent of Africa resides as a metaphorical weight on one's sense of being, representing a place which is not only represented in their ancestry, but also in their development of self-identity. Furthermore, it is a piece of one's identity which can only truly be accessed firsthand by physically traversing the Atlantic Ocean. When one actively chooses to visit the continent, it generally serves as a critical affective experience which manifests itself in the actions undertaken when both interacting with native Africans and reflecting on the travel experience as a whole. Though not intentional, Richard Wright used his travel memoir *Black Power* as a vehicle to further explore his own identity, and through CDA/SFL we can see how this experience intensely shaped and forced him to reconsider how he sought to position himself within the African in African-American.

This literature review begins with a look at Critical Discourse Analysis theory and how it has been applied on a limited basis to *Black Power* previously. From there, it discusses Systemic Functional Linguistics, the CDA approach adopted in the present study, and spotlights some pioneering work done in the field, and how it ties back into CDA. Positioning was looked at next, in the context of its applicability to *Black Power*, along with an examination of research done in the area of African-American identity. From there, I delved into prior entries and research done in the field of travel literature, which then blends into examination of the African diaspora and its potential unification, and finally ending on the Western/White discourse that African-Americans often find themselves combating when making the trip to Africa.

## **Critical discourse analysis overview**

Van Dijk (1985) details critical discourse analysis as “giving close attention to the choice of a specific style of language as a function of social situation, class or ethnic membership, or of social factors such as gender, age, status, or power” (2). Often seen in this type of approach is an “account of variable grammatical expression, such as specific sound realizations, intonation, lexical items, or syntactic structure, given the same underlying meaning or reference, as a function of different personal or social properties of the context of communication” (2). Using the concept of self-motivated stylized language seen in Richard Wright’s lexical choices in *Black Power*, I intend on further examining the text with Paltridge’s (2006) definition:

A critical analysis may include a detailed textual analysis and move from there to an explanation and interpretation of the analysis. It might proceed from there to deconstruct and challenge the text/s being examined. This may include tracing underlying ideologies from, the linguistic features of a text, unpacking particular biases and ideological presuppositions underlying the text, and relating the text to other texts and to people's experiences and beliefs." (p.179)

The text examined in this study reveals Richard Wright’s previously established ideology upon encountering the continent and its people, the details of which can be revealed when analyzing the text through the aforementioned lens. On a broader scale, the issue of confronting Africa head on with hundreds of years of strife, mistreatment, and misconception at one’s back affects the larger sense of African-American society and identity. This underlying and presupposed ideology that African-Americans carry with them when arriving in Africa manifests itself in the discourse acts put forth when encountering and interacting with local Africans and the continent



itself.

### **Prior discourse analysis of *Black Power***

*Black Power* has not been looked at from a purely critical discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistic perspective to construct the self and the Other. Gruesser (1990; 2000), Okpewho, Davies, and Mazrui (2001), Shankar (2001) and others have scratched the surface of this analysis, but only made a few passing observations on the texts to support broader topics. Gruesser (1990; 2000) places a focus specifically on the Africanist discourse which Wright attempts to navigate during his time spent in The Gold Coast. By Africanist discourse, Gruesser (1990) refers to three major conventions: binary oppositions, image projection, and evolutionary language. Through these conventions, Africa is framed within a dream or nightmare scenario. The dream scenario revolves around an idealized, romantic view of Africa and its inhabitants, who will welcome returning African-Americans as long lost relatives. The nightmare scenario is largely white driven, framing Africa as dark, primitive, and tribal. It is this discourse and its elements that deeply impact the perceptions which African-Americans harbor before they actually set foot on the continent of Africa.

Gruesser elaborates that within a Western oriented ideology, dominant preconceptions see the West as advanced, bright, and reasonable while Africa is placed in direct contrast, seen as primitive, dark, and irrational. The prevalence of this ideology is not isolated to white culture, and infiltrates the mind of the African-American in such a way that they cannot help but have these notions embedded within their psyche before, during, and after encounters with Africa. As a member of the West, there's no escaping this fatal, all-encompassing ideology.

Via the complexities that led to their ancestors' forced departure from Africa, to the subsequent slavery, segregation, and continuing racism in their lives and those of the generations before them, African-Americans are stuck in referencing Africa itself as either a dream or a nightmare, when it is not remotely as simple as one or the other. From Gruesser's (1990; 2000) vantage, Wright's entry into the travel writing genre is in essence tainted with this omnipresent discourse, which skews his perception of country, people, and culture.

Okpewho et al. (2001) also assign the manifestation of inherently Western values as the culprit in Wright's inability to analyze the social, cultural, and political undertakings he witnessed without bias in *Black Power*. These thoughts and values often stand in direct opposition with the cultural standards of Africans. Thusly, this preconceived stance colors his observations and dictates the terms of many of his reactions to his encounters. Wright's identity, grounded in the West, becomes more fully realized when presented with the Other as it solidifies his own entrenched belief system.

Shankar (2001) adds to this sentiment as he cites the black Western traveler's discourse as an impediment to the relationship between his Western frame of reference and Africa. Because of this, Wright's distinction between the two sides often can be broken down into both rationality/irrationality and science/religion. As a result of his preconceptions, Wright remains a stranger in Africa, subsequently rendering the continent and its people as somehow behind the Western curve in regards to cultural evolution.

Fabre (as cited in Shankar, 2001) notes some of the other titles that were given consideration for the book other than *Black Power*, which tell more about potential readings of

the memoir. Titles such as “Stranger in Africa” and “Ancestral Home” were given close consideration, but eventually edged out in favor of the eventual title. Shankar puts forth that these two titles are significant in that they showcase the aspect of the stranger in the home of their ancestors trying to manifest some type of resolution amongst uncertainty. Whatever the title, Wright is positioned as an outsider, exiled not by choice, but instead by destiny, trekking across an ocean back to a home that there conceivably should be some sort of connection with. What exactly that ancestry means is very much up for debate.

### **Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)**

SFL looks at language as a system of signs and symbols and how these gestures are interpreted by those around the speaker, essentially looking at social practices and deriving further meaning from the practice. It does operate in some similar ways to CDA, as Young and Harrison (2004) noted three significant parallels, in that each: view language as a social construct (through its role in society and agent in change), share a dialectical position of language where context and discursive events contribute to each other, place emphasis on cultural and historical context with regards to language used.

Herriman (2012) delineates between the two in that SFL looks at the meaning formed from language used that both represents and constructs the world as we know it. The main focus in SFL is therefore on the analysis of authentic texts; that is speech and writing produced in real-life social interaction. Within these real-life social interactions in *Black Power*, the language choices made by Richard Wright reflect his constructed African world. Furthermore, these interactions showcase the shifting identity of those involved, as identity becomes related to

language use itself (Young and Harrison, 2004). Tann (2010) notes how one is classified in the text is key to identity establishment, and serves as the primary factor in determining the self and other. The SFL approach highlights that shifting language use and shifting identity are intertwined and therefore in this study can be used to reveal the identity shifting specific to Wright in his memoir, and with it the sense of self and other.

## **Positioning**

Davies and Harré (1990) were two of the pioneers in the field of positioning through the construction of the self. Their focus is largely on conversation, and how this conversation as a type of social and interpersonal relation showcases acts of speech motivated by some set of perceived societal standards. The concept is not limited to speech and can also be applied to non-verbal cues within the context of the conversation. “Illocutionary force” is put forth by the two researchers as an act of speaking which inherently contains an action within. Between this effect and positioning put forth by the narrator, social meaning and interpretation can be drawn from the speech act. In later research, Harré et al. (2009) explore the morals intertwined with positioning, in that they claim people need to be held responsible for their behavior within certain contexts. One’s behavior should not be based on “hypothetical causality,” but instead by moral driven social psychology. Thusly, this study at times pins Wright’s actions on his moral compass, and accordingly where Africans fall on this scale.

The researchers elaborated on what happens as one takes on a position as their own and how that impacts the people who they interact with.

(...) a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in

terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned (...) An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. (p. 5)

Additionally, Davies and Harré delve into interactive and reflexive positioning respectively, in that the former allows for speech acts to position others, and the latter where the speaker themselves is positioned. These positioned selves can conflict with prior selves, owing to the dynamism of the self. As the African-American comes to Africa, the sense of self is very much uncertain and depends upon the events which take place when on African soil. The acts that come from this experience reflect the ongoing positioning process taking place.

Tirado and Galvez (2007) take this understanding of positioning and bring it further along by noting that a sense of positioning is not static, and instead is contingent upon the narratives, metaphors, and images through which a sense of position is formed. The researchers continue further, claiming that before an act of positioning occurs, it can be questioned and changed accordingly by the positioner. In this way, one can manipulate what is in front of them or at the very least choose to ignore it in order to maintain a presupposed position. African-Americans often come to Africa with a position in tow, in that they are returning back to their rightful homeland, and will be welcomed accordingly. Even in the face of inevitable disappointment, African-Americans can still choose to position themselves accordingly if they so choose, and attempt to accommodate this unexpected development. While Wright may have

come to Africa with open questions regarding his role amongst Africans, the further his journey goes along, he negotiates himself further and further away from those around him. He's continually constructing narratives of himself, the people, and the events going on around him that do little but separate the two sides further.

### **African-American identity**

Diawara (2009) looks deeply into the conceptions regarding identity that both Africans and African-Americans bring to the equation. Not surprisingly, they starkly differ from each other. On the one hand, as noted previously with Abrahams, for Africans concepts of "empire, ethnicity, clan, and family" (61) reign supreme over other notions. They felt alienated was when diasporic blacks strayed from one of these concepts. Cultural continuity was of the utmost importance for this group. In contrast, African-Americans saw Africa as the great unknown, if attributable to anything, starkly different and distant from the West. African-Americans in a sense grew above and beyond what they felt Africa represented to the world, which was not much more than "darkness, fear, and ignorance" (61). These were attributes that diasporic blacks wanted no part of, and saw simply as steps backward. In this way, Wright painted a picture of Africa that many perceived as "harsh and at times justifiably discomfiting to African and African-Americans" (68). More so, coming to Africa to explore his ancestry, Wright not only failed to do so, but he also faced criticism from both sides of this complex relationship. He was seen as simultaneously displaying some type of self-hatred towards his race, as well as potentially holding a grudge against those who descended from African slave merchants.

In the context of Africa, Meriwether (2002) stated that there was no clear answer about

its meaning because of the constantly changing nature of African-Americans' relation with the continent. The identity of African-Americans are fluid in this regard and can depend critically upon the experience of the individual. Tann (2010) echoes this fluidity by calling identity a "situational accomplishment," and along with a sense of community is always in a state of flux. Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau (2003) elaborate further and reaffirm Hall (1990) when they claim that African-American identities are indeed not static, and are shaped by interactions with other African-Americans and others who interact with the culture (Africans). While Wright comes to Africa with an African-American identity in hand, Bamberg et al. (2011) put an emphasis not on having a set identity, but focusing instead on the events which lead to a fluctuating identity formed via discursive activities. These activities are put into use through active engagement in the day-to-day events Wright experiences during his time spent in the Gold Coast. Additionally, Cooke (1986) claimed that Wright explored himself not just by physically going back to Africa, but also by mentally enveloping himself in the culture when possible.

Moreover, when examining travel narratives in particular, Albeny (2015) notes that the genre often reveals more about the identity of the author themselves than what they are able to showcase about Africa. She points to a quote from Wright himself in *Black Power* where he confessed that, "one reacts to Africa as one is, as one lives; one's reaction to Africa is one's life, one's sense of things" (BP 175). In this way, the travel writing guise only serves as a thin veil to cover the deeper purpose of finding a sense of identity in one's ancestral lands.

Rampton (1995) delves into the more general issue of problematic contact between people of different backgrounds, a clear instance of which we have in *Black Power*. He

spotlights that emphasis on these differences can prevent any type of solution towards a sense of intergroup practice.

“Their temporal perspective only runs between the past and present, and ethnicity only matters either as some kind of (concealed) historical burden, or as the (aggressive) reassertion of inheritance, or as both. The only options for the future, it would seem, are neutralised reconciliation or continuing polarisation along the same lines as before” (*Crossing* 297).

Thusly, the aforementioned historical burden of slavery and its lingering effects, along with an attempt at finding a place in a homeland left long ago, can lead to a sense of identity formed along reconciliatory lines or instead by the chasm which has literally and figuratively separated the two groups. Depending upon the outcome, the African-American identity is reformatted accordingly.

### **Travel literature**

Richard Wright is far from the only notable African-American writer to tackle the subject of going back to Africa and what it means in the context of one’s identity and relationship with their ancestral home. Waves of African-American travelers have pushed their own agendas for identity-based searches in the shadows of slavery, resulting in travel accounts driven by racial empowerment over any sense of leisure (Smith, 2009). But time and again Wright’s *Black Power* has been noted for its importance on travel literature as a genre, and more specifically within the context of the transatlantic African-American journey. Diawara (2009) trumpeted the autobiographical account as “one of the most penetrating books about Africa and the



psychological relation between (African) Americans and Africans.”

The genre of travel writing itself has been compared to the novel by Cooke (1986) in that oftentimes the novel showcases the self-realization of the nation, while travel writing contains the actualization of the self. Yet, Pettinger (1998) notes that while the author may be trying to find their true selves, the concept of ‘home’ is fluid and at risk of never being found. Instead of finding a sense of home and its accompanying comforts, the travel writer finds a range of emotions spanning from nostalgia to embarrassment. Wright himself goes through many of these trials over the course of his time in Africa.

**The journey.** Diedrich, Gates Jr., and Pedersen (2014) go to great lengths to highlight the significance of the journey and accompanying struggle itself between the North American and African continents with their book “Black Imagination and the Middle Passage.” The trio posits that not only did Africa remain with the men and women forced into the slave trade, but the African-Americans who make the journey back are shaped in their American heritage very much in the same way. It permeates their view and contributes to a sense of duality between American and African heritages, allowing neither to truly take hold.

In this way the African-American making the journey to Africa sees their identity thrown into flux when encountering the continent. Wright openly ponders this issue en route to the Gold Coast when he states:

*"Africa!* Being of African descent, would I be able to feel and know something about Africa on the basis of a common 'racial' heritage? Africa was a vast continent full of 'my people.'... Or had three hundred years imposed a psychological distance between me and

the 'racial stock' from which I had sprung?" (*BP* 28).

Eyerman (2001) takes things a step further when he claims that even the notion of an African-American is not a natural category, instead artificially forged by slavery. In contrast to those who stay in their homelands, African-American foreigners will never be able to truly access the culture they so desperately seek. How this struggle plays out in the language itself will be shown in the lexical items spotlighted in this study.

The significance of the journey itself must not be underemphasized. Several authors have repeatedly noted how the travel to Africa itself, loaded with expectations often shapes what is next to come for each African-American traveler. Green (2014) points out that Wright's emotion upon even speculating on an arrival in the Gold Coast is impossible to ignore and is reflected in most of the work that follows. Pratt (2008) contextualized this notion in that Wright himself encodes the Atlantic Ocean as a place of evil and death as the middle passage both for ancestral slaves and travel writers who make the return journey.

Richards (2002) looked at the travel habits of African-Americans in Ghana, even referencing some of the more traversed locations noted in *Black Power* and other African-American travel writings. Of particular note in her account is an observation of African-Americans' reactions when investigating some of the coastal castles used to temporarily house slaves before their bondage induced transatlantic journey, how they would sob openly in front of dismayed and confused native African tour guides. The raw emotion which pours out of African-Americans when they come face to face with such traumatic ancestral relics paints a dramatic picture of the long-lasting ramifications of slavery. The reaction of the local guides is also worth

a closer examination and reveals a deeper divide between the two groups. Richards notes the locals' surprise when seeing the violence of the tourists' responses. Is it that they are surprised by how deeply this long ago temporary home has resonated with some? For the bystanding guides, nothing happened to these travelers or even their direct descendants there, so it is near impossible for them to comprehend what they are seeing.

Within the context of the diaspora, the African-American who decides to make the "homeward" journey quickly realizes that the original "Africa" is no longer there. Time and history have erased this mythologized place forever. In fact, its existence was most likely based in misconception to begin with. Nevertheless, the journey itself is necessary for many members of the diaspora to make in order to examine this unique place for oneself and interact with it accordingly. Alas, what awaits is the Africa framed through the Western lens. It is the Africa Wright claims is inferior to the way of life which diaspora members have obtained and created for themselves, separate and distinct from the dark and primitive African ways. (Hall, 1990)

### **Diaspora and unification**

From an anthropological perspective, Africa itself occupies a remembered place in the history of many African-Americans whose ancestors were forcibly removed from their homes and sent halfway across the world into severe bondage under some of the most brutal conditions imaginable. As a direct result of this duress-driven exile, Africa serves as a palpable cultural pillar for the millions of peoples around the world who claim some type of ancestral link there. It is a deeply meaningful, symbolic and tangible homeland for a diverse community scattered across the world. Much more than just a distant continent, Africa is cemented as a symbol of

unification and an anchor of a community for the entire African diaspora (Gupta and Ferguson 1992).

However, even if we allow Africa as a community anchor for all of the diaspora, Gates Jr. and Pedersen (1999) attest that on closer examination members must question their own previously established sense of home and family. The definitions of these terms are very much up for debate when questioning one's sense of self and how their current existence coexists and contrasts with the diaspora. The end result can be a resounding sense of displacement from both communities, supporting a (later elaborated upon) idea of twoness first put forth by Frederick Douglass. In a sense, it is harder for an African-American who wants to explore their diasporic roots because they have to betray and suppress what they know for the unknown. When that unknown does not yield the results desired, one can find themselves in a limbo-like state where identity is shaken to the core.

Jackson and Cothran (2003) propose solutions for better uniting the diaspora and stripping away the misunderstandings. They note the mental and emotional weight which bear upon the members of the diaspora, thus clouding the ability of the non-African to integrate into a stronger identity. The duo argues that the relationship between these members, historically shaped by stereotypes and poor communication, can start to come back together through a promotion of understanding about the history, origin, family structure and social tenets which form its foundation. Palmer (2000) follows suit in noting that the diasporic communities formed by peoples of African descent do indeed share a history of racial oppression and a history of struggle against it. However, he feels that this history intensely shapes the differences of

diaspora members and these differences must be recognized.

**Shared appearances.** As noted in the introduction, one of the main reasons African-Americans go back to their African homeland with such high hopes is because both sides often share the same color of skin. Pettinger (1998) notes this sentiment in that African-American travel literature often puts forth a sense of “racial solidarity” between the two sides that is unique to the black account of Africa. However, that external similarity means much less than many African-American travel writers make it out to be. In fact, it is often one of the major pitfalls such authors face in their experiences with the continent and its people. Kwame Anthony Appiah, in his book *A Long Way From Home: Wright in the Gold Coast*, posits the following on the effect of common blackness on Richard Wright himself:

And it is I think the fact that he cannot understand the minds behind these black faces – these minds that his culture (though not his official theory) had prepared him to find immediately accessible precisely because of the blackness of the faces -- that generates the first defensive condescension and then, in the end, the frank paranoia. (187-188)

Wright displays the defensiveness noted by Appiah in the midst of an African death ceremony when he utters, “I had understood nothing. I was black and they were black, but my blackness did not help me” (*BP*, p.148). It is as though Wright thought their blackness would be enough to forge a connection, until faced with the stark reality that it was not to be. This realization becomes deeply troubling for Wright and manifests itself throughout the narrative.

From the other perspective, Abrahams (1960) takes the African position in noting that they do not nearly place the emphasis on color that African-Americans do, instead worrying

about their positioning in their own group, which has nothing to do with color. For Campbell (2003), the focus lies on the differences not only internally, but also in their external skin tone, in that shades of brown were specific to geographic areas for Africans while generations of distance had brought together African-American skin colors. Pettinger (1998) elaborates that crossing African borders often involves a complete changing of color as different countries and different cultures don't have a common understanding of what it means to be black. Blackness is far from an established concept in the U.S., let alone on another continent. For Richard Wright, what he may have assumed as a commonality between the two sides was instead again a reminder that he was indeed an outsider to the African peoples he met.

The expectation by the writers of a connection with Africa and its people is another rich thread which carries through several texts. Youngs (2010) cites the words of Wright himself when he contemplates visiting the Gold Coast says aloud, "I am an African! I'm of African descent!" as if trying to prove it true to himself. Smith (2009) continues by putting forth Africa as a symbol of re-affirmation and a place where one can re-identify themselves against the backdrop of a land they once called home. Gruesser (1990) explicitly states that Wright came to make connections with Africans. It is not only the idea that Africa looms large on the horizon which complicates how one frames their identity, but that there are a set of expectations that are rarely met.

### **Challenging white discourse**

Gates Jr. and Pedersen (1999) looked to Fredrick Douglass and the aforementioned concept of twoness, having a sense of Africanness and Americanness, but finding oneself in the

place of having neither at all. Centuries of distance have eroded the internal link to Africa, while African-Americans have struggled to the present day for equality in an American society still dominated by those of European heritage. As a result, African-Americans have arguably no claim to either one of the ethnic markers that form their background. Until the African-American decides to go back to Africa, they still have the ability to mythologize, romanticize, and attempt to identify with their ancestral homeland because they have no concrete evidence to the contrary. But once this trek is made by the thousands of anonymous African-Americans along with more notable authors such as Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, Claude Mckay, Alice Walker, and Richard Wright himself, Gates Jr. and Pedersen note, this sense of twoness takes over and the idealized Africa that was always off the horizon is no longer.

Gruesser (1990; 2000) and Palmer (2000) note that the authors of these travel writing texts try to rid themselves of the white driven American experience which has not only intensely shaped their lives, but also controlled much of the dialogue about Africa. In challenging this white, Western discourse, Wright attempts to portray an Africa in line with the perceived African heritage forcefully stripped from their bloodlines. Gruesser (1990) goes on to claim that in doing so, however, the futile attempt to engage with African culture leads to a less accurate description of the continent than established by the aforementioned white writers who are more detached from the complicated history of the land. The work of Wright is significant in that it draws both comparisons and differentiations on the text in question in addition to other travel literature, with an emphasis on the Africanist perspective.

## Chapter 3 - Methodology

### Introduction

At the outset of this study, I went through several close readings of *Black Power*, pulling out extended excerpts I thought were relevant to the targeted lexical items which addressed the two research questions. In addition to this process, I intended to use MonoConc 2.2 concordancing software in order to approach and dissect the text via corpus linguistic methods. However, I realized quite early in the process that this software was not offering me enough context in order to appropriately identify and explain the language used by Wright about Africa/Africans and himself. Therefore, I put the memoir into a Microsoft Word file and searched the document in this manner for any excerpts I may have missed. This also allowed me to be more discriminatory in the language I chose to omit from the study, as it offered a larger look into scenes from the memoir, to judge how applicable they were to answering the research questions.

I experimented using several other terms which didn't make the final cut for this analysis. Words such as *white*, *religion*, *mystical*, *Western*, *fanatic*, and several others were deemed expendable, as they were not as crucial to positioning and identity forming as the final words chosen. However, it should be noted these terms did come up somewhat frequently alongside the final terms chosen, and were analyzed accordingly within the context of the excerpts used.

Along the same lines, another issue of note which complicated matters was the frequent decision of how much text to include for the excerpts. At times, the language used across one particular scene would be so rich with data and context that cutting it short may have



compromised the effectiveness of the analysis. One prime example of this was the speech which Wright gave to the crowd of Africans at the Kwame Nkrumah rally at the outset of his trip. From start to finish, there were so many lexical choices made of note that it was nearly impossible to cut segments for practicality purposes. Also, as in other lengthy excerpts, the language progression throughout the excerpt was another rich thread of analysis that would have been largely rendered moot if the scene was sliced into smaller excerpts.

## **Methodology**

Corpus linguistic analysis allowed for a more accurate micro and macro view of the text with specific lenses to draw out potential identity-based lexical choices. Key words were examined such as *Africa(n)*, *heritage*, *descent*, *distance*, *black*, *white*, *primitive*, *strange*, and more, along with according collocates. Pronoun, adjective, noun, verb, and article choice were analyzed for any underlying meaning that showcases the author's identity. This process helped to identify the linguistic tools Wright uses to project his identity and position Africa/Africans while experiencing the continent.

## **Theoretical Framework**

*Black Power* was looked at in this study from a critical discourse analysis perspective put forth by van Dijk (1996), in that it addressed the relationship between discourse and identity, most notably how that power is enacted, reproduced or legitimized by the text and talk of Richard Wright himself. Wright often falls back on the idea of the superiority of the West and the inferiority of the African tribal ways which he encounters on a regular basis. He finds himself flummoxed and at times disgusted with the manner in which he sees locals carry themselves in

both their action and their manner of speech.

For example, Wright often refers to the events he witnesses with the negative connotation of “strange”. The following have been taken from *Black Power*: “unsettling feeling engendered by the strangeness of a completely different life” (65), “I feel strange; I see and hear so much that I don’t understand” (74), “something strange will happen/what sort of strange thing” (218), “strange how the women always walked with the women” (282), “African attitude in legal matters is strange” (309). Often times he doesn’t even try to understand, instead just brushing it off as foreign and bizarre. This depiction is an important recurrence throughout the book, as it lays the groundwork for the relationship between Wright and Africa and its inhabitants. The example of the “strangeness” of what Wright witnesses is only one example of many of how he prescribes his views on everything around him while also framing it as the Other.

Using critical discourse analysis, I examined the language used in the text when the author both interacts and reflects upon his experiences with native Africans. The language used provides rich insight into not only the author’s identity as an African-American, but also how he strives to alter and position himself and his identity when in the presence of Africans.

### **Approach to Data Analysis**

To approach the data, I used Systemic Functional Linguistics, itself a branch of Critical Discourse Analysis. Within the SFL field, I specifically looked at the tenor of the text. Eggins and Slade (2005) specify four specific areas within tenor that reflect upon role relations: status relations, affective involvement, contact, and orientation to affiliation. As one develops a social sense of self, they take on a particular role, and assign roles to those around them. These roles

could prove equal/unequal, depending on the context of the encounter. Poynton (1985) cites force, authority, expertise, or status symbol as potential justification for creating inequality. Status symbol in particular is ascribed to some type of uneven but desired social object, standing, or achievement. Affective involvement is how the interaction resonates within the interactants on both sides. This could be high/low, positive/negative, and permanent/temporary. Contact refers to how familiar the interactants are with each other, in which higher frequencies of interaction would breed deeper familiarity. Also considered is whether the meetings are due to pragmatic tasks, or simply because of socialization. Lastly, orientation to affiliation addresses the manner in which one seeks to identify with the cultural system of those one interacts with, resulting in acceptance or outsider status.

Eggins and Slade (2005) go on to cite four specific patterns which characterize social identities of interactants: grammatical, semantic, discourse structure, and generic structure. The grammatical aspect of speech looks at turn taking, clause mood, and reciprocal/non-reciprocal talk. Next, looking at the semantics of speech shows attitudinal and expressive meanings through lexical items and choice of evaluative or attitudinal speech. Discourse structure looks at longer form turn taking, and how one chooses to maintain or end an exchange. Finally, generic structure goes across turns as well and looks at the larger function of the dialogue, such as gossip or storytelling.

### **Question and Answer Approach**

To answer the first research question regarding narration/positioning and how this showcases Wright's identity, I looked for the aforementioned tenor based role relation areas

mentioned by Eggins and Slade (2005) in addition to lexical items (with a strong emphasis on pronoun, article, noun, adjective, verb, and collocation usage) and patterns used in Wright's speech (both through his inner monologue and the direct conversations he has with local Africans). For the second question, I examined how Wright describes the continent throughout the course of the memoir and how this trends negative, ending in a sense of disenchanting events which fill the unknown at the beginning of his time in Africa.

## **Chapter 4 - Analysis**

### **Introduction**

This study uses critical discourse analysis to reveal how specific language choices via lexical items, self-narration, and examined positioning put forth by the author reveals his identity in relation to Africa and its inhabitants. As a memoir, the text has the added dimension of the author as narrator and writer. So, in addition to the dialogue between Richard Wright and native Africans, this chapter also examines specific instances of the author's internal monologue and how these ruminations reflect upon the dynamics of the relationship between the author, the African people, and Africa itself, whereby revealing an undercurrent of cynicism and self-doubt through careful consideration on the identity of both the self and positioning of the Other.

Wodak and Meyer (2009) confirm that critical discourse analysis is most interested in the larger scale social phenomena that require a more complex approach to analysis which requires critical examination to be challenged and not just assumed. Paltridge (2006) adds that what is beneath the discourse (namely values and assumptions) connect both social and cultural practices. What one says and does reflects upon one's perception of the self, others, and the world around them. Furthermore, the author goes on to note that identity via discourse use is also an area of interest for CDA researchers, in that this dynamic sense of identity is built through discourse and its related actions. With this understood, it is immensely worthwhile to examine Wright's thoughts, dialogue, and actions more closely (and indeed all African-Americans who choose to make the transatlantic journey) to truly see how this ever-evolving and complex phenomena plays out through the use of discourse.

Richard Wright's time spent in The Gold Coast in 1953, and depicted in *Black Power*, offers a glimpse into the Western-framed mindset towards the larger issue of African-American African relations. Wright elaborates on time spent before, during, and at the conclusion of his journey, revealing the dynamic sense of self and the Other and how the two coexist (and clash). The particular language choices by Wright expose long-established divides and preconceptions between the two groups which allows the readers to examine why each side resides so far from the other physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Though Wright claimed to be approaching the continent and its people from an unbiased perspective, in practice, this was never going to be the case (Appiah, 1988). As an African-American, he is much too close to the subject, and much too close to the history that shapes the African Diaspora.

As one of the most prolific African-American writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Wright had a way with words that few only dream of. More than 50 years after his death, his work still plays a massive role in African-American studies, and makes its way into many a high school classroom through some of his other notable works such as *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. His lofty literary standing in American literary canon cannot be denied. So what happened in The Gold Coast? The language examined in detail in this chapter goes to great lengths to show the bias Wright carried with him that exposes itself repeatedly in framing his own identity, along with positioning the Africans (and Africa itself) that he comes across.

Looking at particular linguistic choices of nouns, adjectives, pronouns, articles and collocations used to describe himself and what is around him, Wright reveals a sense of both the self and the Other and depend upon each other for meaning in a confusing and oftentimes strange place. Where applicable, the language used was examined for one or more of the four following

areas of tenor in Systemic Functional Linguistics as put forth by Eggins and Slade (2005): status relations, affective involvement, contact, and orientation to affiliation. Through the lens of these four constructs, we can break down the impact of the language choices made by Wright. Status relations provides a bit of background on the relationship, and how that carries into actual encounters. Affective involvement provides an opportunity to see how Africa and its people directly impact Wright, thus shoring up the idea that Wright frames himself in opposition to the Other. Contact examines the actual encounters between Wright and the locals he meets, where we can examine word choice on both sides, as well as the direction of conversation. Finally, orientation to affiliation showcases Wright's attempts to become involved with Africa and its culture in order to find some sort of long lost bond with his long ago countrymen.

The section starts with use of the term *distance*, specifically psychological and physical distance. Both concepts are mentioned several times over and serve as one of the underlying causes of the difference between the members of the diaspora. Psychological distance has occurred due to the distinctly different development of two different cultures over hundreds of years and shaped by different outward influences. Physical distance refers to the presence of the Atlantic Ocean keeping Africans-Americans and Africans so far apart after the implementation of slave trade. The action taken to create the physical distance directly contributed to the psychological distance which still remains even when bridging the physical gap. Thusly, the Other is twice removed, once in actuality, and the other in the mind.

## Positioning the Other

### Distance

#### Psychological Distance

The term distance is used in various ways when it comes to *Black Power*. As it stands, between native Africans and African-Americans, there is a physical divide of over 5000 miles from the east coast of North America to the west coast of Africa. This tangible, physical distance is mentioned earlier in the study, and has been examined through several different lenses. It is the intangible aspect of the psychological difference which is up for debate and further examination. Wright uses the term *distance* to position the other, and by extension himself, when it comes to Africa. Twice throughout the memoir does Wright use “psychological distance”, once referring to the oral tradition that has developed in African culture (which has reinforced the “barrier” between Africa and the Western world), and secondly to detail the difference between the educated and uneducated people of the culture. Both times, the terms are seen with Wright’s commentary on the illiteracy of the African people. In this way, Wright proposes that illiteracy has created a greater void, hence distance between the long ago countrymen. In the excerpt below, adjective and noun usage contributes to the formulation of status relations between the two sides.

This **dense illiteracy** and the **astonishing** oral tradition—transmitted from generation to generation—upon which it feeds, its roots sunk in **tribal memory**, has formed a **barrier**, has erected a **psychological distance** between the African and the Western world and has made it **increasingly difficult** for the African to be known. This **distance** has not lessened with the passage of time; indeed, it has **widened**, for the tempo of progress of the West has qualitatively made the **difference** between the Western and non-Western world almost absolute. The **distance** today between tribal man and the West is greater than the **distance** between God and Western man of the sixteenth century. Western man could talk to his God in those days; today **illiterate tribal minds** are **numbed** when they hear of the atomic weapons of the Western world; and even when **those tribal** people revolt against the West and its technical mastery of the earth, they of time find themselves, ironically, more dependent upon their white masters than before they launched their nationalistic revolutions.... (BP 137)

There’s a lot to work through here, so I will start with some of the most significant vocabulary



used as Wright describes the reasons why the psychological distance is currently in place. Interestingly, language (and lack thereof) serve as a main point of contention for the author. He points to a “dense illiteracy” and “astonishing oral tradition” grounded in “tribal memory” forming a “barrier” between the two sides. Of note here is the adjective choice used with the two nouns. Illiteracy, negative in its own right, does not just exist, but its density pervades any sense of a potential breakthrough. It is as though Wright has to make his way through a thicket of miscommunication just to allow for the establishment of ties between the two sides prevents. Additionally, the use of the adjective *astonishing* along with *dense* creates a negative connotation in the excerpt that allows for a sense of status relations to take place. With such critical language used to describe the Other, Wright has already asserted his intellectual superiority. The status of the Other has been set, and they are inferior. The sense of illiteracy and oral tradition contributes to the schism between the two sides. Wright himself does not take the burden of addressing this issue, only noting its contributions to the ongoing issues between the two sides.

It is also worth spotlighting Wright’s pronoun and article choices in this passage. The usage of “the” before African and “those” before tribal people distance Wright from the subjects of his speech. Creating distance from those with which he does not wish to affiliate (or even orient) allows him to compartmentalize the aspects of the African culture which he does not want to involve himself in, preferring instead to stay separate and describe such unflattering characteristics from a distance. Essentially, Wright is reinforcing the distance between the two sides with his lexical usage.

Without a sense of literacy, it would seem natural for people to compensate with a

dependency on the oral aspect of language. For Wright, the aforementioned adjectives used default to the negative. Instead of trying to find some common ground, or even presenting the differences neutrally, he relies on Western presuppositions, framing himself (along with African-Americans and the West on the whole) as superior and those who do not meet such intellectual standards as inferior.

Furthermore, Wright notes above that the distance between the two sides has not become closer because of modern technological development, but instead widened further than ever before, due largely to “the atomic weapons of the Western world” and “the West and its technical mastery of the earth”. Outside of Wright’s thinly veiled criticism of the West, one would naturally think that the advent of commercial travel and with it easier global communication would be one step in the right direction to rectify the physical distance (and by extension the accompanying psychological, emotional, and spiritual distance), yet, instead Wright focuses once more on the illiteracy of Africans, and how it “numbs” minds bound to tribal traditions. On this occasion, he piggybacks on the prior claim of illiteracy and uses it as an adjective to describe the minds of tribal members. As Wright portrays tribal Africans as having numbed minds and dense illiteracy, a sense of inferiority for the Other must be drawn from such language use. The following passage is a continuation of the excerpt above, and uses the term “irrational” to denote both Africa and the observation of the West from the African perspective. This further commentary on the state of the status relations between the two sides is interesting, as Wright feels fit to speak not only for African-Americans, but also for Africans. Is he qualified to do so as a Westerner with African ancestry?

A Westerner must make an effort to banish the feeling that what he is observing in Africa is **irrational**, and, unless he is able to understand the underlying assumptions of the African's beliefs, **the** African will always seem a "**savage**." And yet **the** African too is struck by what seems to him the **irrational** nature of the world that is non-African, for he too does not often know the **assumptions** of that non-African world. And when those **assumptions** are revealed to him they are just as **fantastic** to him as his are to the West. (BP 138)

Wright makes the reader aware of his cognizance that Westerners need to rid themselves of "irrational" preconceptions coming into the continent. Africans too endure this when gazing upon the West, so much so that both sides of the equation think the other is irrational. Both sides are plagued with this mentality, marked with such a stirring negative adjective. Wright essentially warns of the affective involvement one is presented with when interacting with Africa and its inhabitants. Reactions to "irrational nature", the "African as a savage", and the revealing of "fantastic assumptions" explicitly highlight the ludicrousness that not only Westerners experience, but also Africans! How can anyone involved be expected to disregard this bias? Wright the intellectual certainly cannot, and as a result is quite hypocritical here, if looking at his word choice from the prior excerpt only a few lines before in the memoir. Has Wright himself dispersed of the Western-tainted lens? The aforementioned linguistic evidence points to an emphatic no. If Wright is unable to do this, can any African-American when faced with a group inherently containing such distinct characteristics of otherness? There is no easy answer to this question, and this is why Wright ponders such issues so openly and frequently. The psychological distance, as much as the physical, is one which is not easily or clearly bridged. The sense of Africans as the Other transcends the physical, encroaches upon the psychological, and proves to be an all-encompassing, affective barrier to any semblance of reunification for the African diaspora.

### **Physical Distance**

Other occasions where *distance* is used by Wright are more on the physical level, often

referencing the slave trade itself and the transatlantic distance traversed by shared blood ancestors. One passage of note refers to the idea that Africans openly balk at the concept of family members leaving their homeland by choice, traveling simply for potential opportunities. Wright comes to find that Africans do not embark upon this type of travel for leisure or otherwise unless absolutely necessary. He uses this observation to contrast the commonly held belief to what actually happened during the slave trade, going to far as to label it a “tragic misconception”, and elaborating on the contradictory nature of the modern-day stance versus that of centuries ago.

**The Africans, mystical and fanatical lovers of their ancestral soil**, could not conceive of people voluntarily leaving their homes and families and traveling **vast distances** merely for the sake of trade. A **tragic misconception!** Four hundred and thirty-one years ago, the first African to leave a record of protest, diplomatic yet **charged with anxiety**, spoke as follows... (BP 64)

The first clause used here deserves closer examination. As noted before, Wright continues to the definite article “the” before talking about Africans. Two important things happen as a result of this article usage. It is as though all Africans are one and the same, which is blatantly false for a continent as geographically large and culturally diverse as Africa. Even more, by using the definite article, he removes (and therefore distances) himself even further from the people he talks about. It is as if this group is a completely foreign concept to him, and thusly are labeled as such. Problematically, he goes on to paint Africans as “mystical and fanatical lovers of their ancestral soil”. Again, Wright uses key adjectives to qualify Africans as the other in a particular way. Both *mystical* and *fanatical* can be taken negatively, especially when considering mysticism in a derogatory fashion, as seen in other passages when Wright addresses African concepts of juju. Additionally, as fanatics, they seemingly take their devotion too far for comfort and into dangerous territory. In these ways Wright continues to position Africans distantly, very much as the Other in his Western-centered world.

Another note on this front is needed concerning Wright's use of the pronoun "their" when used with ancestral soil. Representing the third person plural, Wright again leaves himself out of this reference with his pronoun choice. Is not the soil he speaks of claimed by common (albeit far removed) ancestry? Is this not the home of Wright's ancestors? While Wright may share ancestry with Africans, maybe this group of Africans being referred to "the" Africans, are not a group he considers to have shared ancestry. This is a small but telling language choice which may shed more light on Wright's truest sense of affiliation (or lack thereof) towards the other, and by extension, the distancing of the self from this group.

Lastly, Wright uses distance in a physical sense here, in terms of travel. Another strong contradiction between the two sides arises, as Wright points to a historically grounded African preference for tribal ties taking precedent over travel pursuits, while the soon to be African-Americans were not even given a choice in the matter. Essentially Africans sold their own people (though not in the tribal sense of course) to far flung places around the world they couldn't even comprehend themselves (let alone the bondage that awaited them), thus facilitating the African diaspora. Therefore, African-Americans, having been forcibly denied the continent so many centuries ago, cannot possibly fathom the depths of the African attachment to their land, as they can't even remotely claim America in the same fashion, let alone Africa!

When I'd come to Africa, I didn't know what I'd find, what I'd see; **the only prepossession** I'd had was that I'd **doubted** that I'd be able to walk into **the African's cultural house** and **feel at home** and know my way around. Yet, what I was now looking at in this powerfully improvised dance of these women, I'd seen before in America! How was that possible? And, what was more, this African dance today was as **astonishing and dumfounding** to me as it had been when I'd seen it in America.

Never in my life had I been able to dance more than a few elementary steps, and the carrying of even the simplest tune had always been beyond me. So, what had **bewildered** me about Negro dance expression in the United States now **bewildered** me in the same way in Africa.

I'd long contended that the American Negro, because of what he had undergone in the United States, had been basically altered, that his consciousness had been filled with a new content, that "racial" qualities were but myths of **prejudiced** minds. Then, if that were true, how could I account for what I now saw? And what

I now saw was an **exact duplicate** of what I'd seen for so many long years in the United States. But the question was lodged firmly in my mind, **enthroned** there so strongly that it would never leave until I had, at least to **my satisfaction**, solved the **riddle** of why black people were able to retain, despite **vast distances**, centuries of time, and the imposition of alien cultures, such basic and fundamental patterns of behavior and response. (BP 78)

Above, Wright openly questions how members on both sides of the Atlantic have maintained some common traits (in this instance that of physical dancing seen while at a local gathering, which he claims to have seen in the same fashion stateside). Of note here is that Wright is outsider to both sides of the discussion. He claims that he could never dance in this fashion in the states, and that it was “astonishing and dumfounding” then, as it is now when he sees it in Africa, performed by Africans. Though he is oriented to what he sees, there is no sense of affiliation.

This is the second time we have seen Wright use the adjective “astonishing” to describe the behavior of the Africans he comes across, reflecting a strong sense of surprise for Wright in that he did not expect to confront people with such characteristics. He doubles down on this astonishment by claiming he was as *bewildered* by what he is seeing in Africa as he was in the U.S. as well! Not only is this duplicity amazing for Wright, but he can't comprehend how these primal traits have remained the same, especially as he does not subscribe to the idea of commonalities through race. How then, are the events he sees “an exact duplicate” of what he has seen in the United States? This “riddle” again has no easy answer, at least not for Wright. In this instance, the physical distance has contributed to the psychological distance, and the ramifications resonate deeply.

Last, as strictly the observer in this scene, Wright resembles a wallflower of sorts at the dance. In a situation not unique to Africa, but permeating his social life, he willingly sits out the social activity. If he was more willing to engage with this vital aspect of both his own culture and

that of the Africans he witnesses, potentially there would be further avenues for affiliation.

### **The Primitive “Other”**

Wright admits in the following passage that does not know much about Africa and its people, having only read books on the primitive aspects of the culture. In these cases, the book itself represented the Other, with people and places place far away from real life. Now, in his journey, the physical distance has been removed. In its place is a “strange reality”, which troubles Wright because he doesn’t have any tangible frame of reference to soften the reaction. In fact, the primitiveness of the Africans goes to reinforce the strangeness of the scene. Wright cannot just accept the primitive he sees as reality. His bias, and subsequently his judgment, has colored everything before him. Essentially, he’s been preconditioned with the Western, white dominated perspective on Africa, already tainted with the idea of a primitive Africa and Africans as somehow lesser than the West.

The word *primitive*, generally speaking, has a negative connotation. This is especially so in *Black Power* when brought up in contrast to the West. For Wright, the West is significantly more advanced, and, in direct contrast, Africa and its people reflect a sense of primitiveness. In their lives, work, rituals, traditions, style of dress, religion and more, this sense of primitiveness permeates all senses of their being. Problematically, Wright can’t even define what primitive exactly means to him, openly questioning this in his internal monologue, as seen in the excerpt below written before the trip to The Gold Coast.

Was Africa “**primitive**”? But what did being “**primitive**” mean? I’d read books on “**primitive**” people, but, while reading them, their contents had always seemed somehow **remote**. Now a **strange** reality, in some way akin to me, was **pressing** close, and I was **dismayed** to discover that I didn’t know how to react to it. (*BP* 24)

In conjunction with the quotation marks used, it is as if Wright can't relate to, let alone comprehend what exactly *primitive* as a descriptor means? Echoing the previous section, he distances himself even further from the idea (and the people who embody it) by setting off the term with quotation marks. Furthermore, he notes from his Western-based education that he has read books on people considered primitive before. Yet they were just abstract ideas in books. They were distant, very much the Other. Now, the primitive other has taken a human form. Not just any human form, but that of a supposed ancestral relative. The descriptive dimension of the adjective African in African-American has been realized as a primitive being, and as a well-educated Westerner, Wright doesn't know how to comprehend this. His lack of comprehension doesn't simply set him apart, but in his own words it leaves him "dismayed to discover that (he) didn't know how to react to it". As an academic, Wright feels he should know how to react and comprehend this concept, and identify just exactly what it means. His affective involvement stemming from Africa and its people not only appears during physical interactions, but also during times of reflection.

Later in the memoir, as Wright encounters the Other firsthand, primitiveness becomes even more overwhelmingly negative. Several times throughout the memoir, he equates the actions, beliefs, and minds of Africans as primitive. In these occasions we could easily substitute synonyms such as backward, obtuse, and misguided. There's no mistaking the condescension in Wright's words. The following are some excerpts of Wright's observations in this way.

The religion of the Akan is not **primitive**; it is simply **terrifying**. And even Dr. Danquah seems to feel that what he claims for **the African** is a little too tall, for he modestly asserts (page 116): "I do not, of course, recommend to modern European thought to follow the Akan and worship this mystery that explains why any man, at his choice, has it in him to become a **god** or a **beast**." (BP 241)

I'd now talked to enough educated Africans of the Gold Coast for there to emerge in my mind a **dim** portrait of an African character that the world knew little or nothing about.... I could imagine a young boy being born in a **tribe**, taking his mother's name, belonging to the blood-clan of his mother, but coming under the



daily authority of his father, starting life by following his father's trade. I could well imagine this boy's father's coming in contact with missionaries who would tell him that his religion was **crude, primitive**, that he ought to bring his family into the church of the One and Living God.... I could imagine that family's trying to change its ways; I could sense **conflicts** between husband and wife, between the father's family and the mother's family over the issue of Christianity; and I could readily picture the father, in the end, winning his argument on the basis of his superior earning power gained from working for Christian Europeans. Let us assume, then, that the boy is the first child that the family has consented to send to the mission school.... There, he learns how "**bad**" is the life of his **tribe**; he's taught to know what power the outside world has, how **weak** and **fragile** is his country in comparison to the might of England, America, or France. Slowly he begins to feel that the communal life under the various stools is a **childlike** and **primitive** thing, and that the past of his **tribe reeks of human sacrifice**. (BP 255-56)

It's about six o'clock and all's quiet. The green hills, haloed by clouds, bend **broodingly** over the town. No wonder the mind of "**primitive**" man felt that there were spirits in this jungle, for it does seem that some presence, some living but invisible being is hovering here. It is, of course, the weather, a weather that dominates everything, seeping into the senses, creating a **mood**. (BP 276)

When reflecting on the religion of the Akan, *primitive* doesn't do the concept justice, and instead Wright labels the belief system as "simply terrifying". A set of spiritual beliefs, held by a group of people who share a major identifier in their Africanness, has rendered Wright terrified. The negative connotation of this adjective cannot be understated. In fact, it is so strong a term, frankly it is hard to fathom his terror. Does he fear for his life? His soul? His identity? What exactly has Wright so terrified? Wright is deeply affected by their set of beliefs, an affect which never would have occurred had he not made the trip to The Gold Coast.

Other adjectives used to describe local religion in the second excerpt are similarly negative, using terms such as "crude", "childlike", and of course, "primitive". In this snippet of the text, he is largely playing the role of Christian European missionary, as he visualizes the impact the Europeans have had on the locals. Yet Wright himself labeled the religion as "terrifying" previously! Though he tries to mask some of his personal sentiment behind the criticism of the Europeans, his sense of condescension about local religious beliefs (and potentially religion on the whole) is undeniable. We must note here that Wright was not a religious sort coming into Africa, having been raised a Seventh-Day Adventist but subscribing to Communism in his later years, and

this line of thinking continued and served as more fuel to the fire that Africa was a backwards and non-modern place. Also, as his prior terror echoes that of the Europeans, we see once more the impact of Wright's non-native biased lens.

### **Black Bodies Described as “Other”**

Darkness, specifically the color of one's skin, is a common identifier for many African-Americans. It is the color of one's skin which sets them apart from other, non-black countrymen. Whether brown, black, or some hue in between, one's skin color, along with their hair and other distinct characteristics, are immediate, visual identifiers to determine if one is African-American or not. In fact, for hundreds of years, and even to this day in certain cases, one's skin color can allow or prevent particular activities, actions, dialogues, etc., from taking place. One's skin color is of great importance to African-Americans (and really all Americans to varying degrees). In contrast native Africans do not prescribe skin color with remotely the same significance. Family and tribal ties are much more important than skin tone, and simply because one shares a common color of skin, it does not guarantee any type of connection.

As Wright defaults to established African-American identifiers, they simply don't apply in Africa. But these old default identifiers die hard. The blackness of one's skin for right has generally oriented him to a given person or group of people, then bred a sense of affiliation. Not in Africa. Below are two telling excerpts from the memoir where Wright, both before and after leaving a local ritual performed after a death, feeling confused and lost, notes that the blackness between himself and the Africans he encounters as the only common characteristic they share.

**They** were **black** and so was **I**. But my clothes were different from theirs; they would know me for a **stranger**. (BP 147)

I had **understood nothing**. I was **black** and **they** were **black**, but **my blackness did not help me**. (BP 148)

These two passages are particularly telling. In the face of uncertainty, on his way to the local ritual, Wright acknowledges a shared blackness. Essentially this will allow him to pass as a local, based solely on appearance. But it is still “they” and “I” for Wright. The shared skin color may let him in the door, but that’s the extent of the commonality, so much so that they can’t even be referred to by the same pronoun. Despite the shared skin color, Wright is well aware that his clothes will certainly give him away as a foreigner from outward appearances. Seemingly that wouldn’t be the only giveaway, as he doesn’t even know how to participate or communicate as a local, but maybe he just isn’t thinking that far ahead. After he bears witness to the ceremony, he leaves with a changed perspective. While still acknowledging the common skin, its usefulness has all but dissipated. In no way did a shared outward appearance help him understand the ways of those he encountered. Again, he defaults to “I” and “they”, staying away from using the first person plural. The differences have not been bridged, and the surface level commonality has been rendered moot. Africans have been rendered as the Other once more.

### Negative Descriptions

More often than not, Wright uses negatively tinged adjectives to describe the locals he sees and encounters. Though they conceivably share the same color of skin (as pointed out on several occasions) Wright goes out of his way to describe specific body parts of Africans he comes across. Below are some of the most noteworthy negatively described bodies.

Mr. Hagerson was a **brown-skinned man** of seventy- odd, clad in a pair of baggy trousers and a frayed shirt. He was **barefooted** and it seemed that a **part of the flesh of his toes had worn away**. He stretched out a **shaking, skinny hand**, greeted me with a smile, **obviously delighted to meet a stranger**. (BP 201)

When I was back upon the streets again I was **impressed** by what I felt to be a sense of **fragility**, of **delicacy** almost, of the physique of the people. For the most part they were **small-boned, of medium height, well-developed muscularly** but tending toward **slenderness**. I had an **intuitive** impression that these people were **old, old, maybe the oldest people on earth**, and I felt a sense of **melancholy** knowing that their **customs**,

**laboriously** created and posited for thousands of years, had been **condemned as inferior**, and **shattered** by a **strong** and **predatory** nation. The **delicate** strands of that **fragile** culture, so **organically** dependent upon the soil and climate of West Africa, so purely woven out of the **naked impulses of naked men**, could never be reconstituted. **We** had to depend upon guesses and folklore to determine what that **culture** had once meant to them. True, **they** still clung, in secrecy and shame, to the ways of their fathers; but, surrounded by a new order of life, they didn't and couldn't believe in them as they once had.

I was **pleased** to see that, with but a few exceptions, **they did not deliberately disfigure or deform their bodies, distend their lips, or force huge holes in their ears or nostrils**. Once or twice I did see women who had induced **strange** swellings on their skins in order to beautify themselves, but that was rare. (I divined later that their religious customs made **such deformations abhorrent** to them, for they felt that one's chances of passing, when one died, into the other world depended somewhat upon the degree to which one's body was intact. Circumcision was **taboo** among the Ashanti, and, among those close to the royal family, the spilling of a woman's blood was also strictly forbidden. An intelligent African doctor told me that no wife of the King of Ashanti could submit to any operation, no matter how urgently needed.) (*BP* 89-90)

I came upon a group of old men sitting upon their wooden stools, their **naked backs** resting against a stone wall; they were talking and their **bony black bodies** reminded me of those wooden carvings now so rare in Africa and which can be seen only in the drawing rooms of rich Europeans. (*BP* 105)

I paused and watched a mother dart her **black and gnarled fingers** in and out of a huge wooden mortar... (*BP* 166)

I noticed that the **children's bellies looked like taut, black drums, so distended were they**. Almost every child, boys as well as girls, had **monstrous umbilical hernias**. We came to a broad lagoon across which a few rotting logs had been placed as a bridge. He walked surefootedly across and I hung back, going slowly, balancing myself. The children, for some reason, stopped at the water's edge. We skirted a small pond in which **men and women were bathing, their black skins streaked with white lather**. (*BP* 166)

The market's **most amazing** stall contained about two hundred black men, women, and children squatting upon many mounds of charcoal. At first I could not make out what was happening, so generally black did the scene seem; only after a few moments' gazing did I see that the **color of the charcoal was blending so evenly with the black skins as to create an over-all impression of pall**. **Slowly I distinguished whites of eyes staring at me as I stood gaping....** (*BP* 320)

Fingers are not just mentioned, but described as "black and gnarled", adjectives which give the impression to the reader that they could be from some sort of deformed being representing the Other. Bodies are not simply naked, but are "bony and black", reminiscent of inanimate objects. Even more telling is how he describes children with umbilical hernias, often seen as bulges around the bellybutton area. Reinforcing the notion of the Africans he comes across as other beings, he terms the children's stomachs as "monstrous", not leaving much to the imagination outside of conclusions of shocking otherness. Even the blackness of the skin, seemingly Wright's only common identifier, merges with those working with charcoal "to create an over-all impression of

pall”, in that the people he sees invoke a sense of gloom. The repeated adjective choices of Wright towards the Africans he encounters results not only describing the Other, but even provides a sense that Africans are another being altogether.

When it comes to the female form, Wright most glaringly and consistently notes the frequent nudity of the women. Female nudity strikes Wright as particularly troublesome, as breasts are “elongated”, “flopping loosely and grotesquely”, and “flopping wildly”. This seems to be another case of the Western lens pervading Wright’s everyday observations. As with the prior bodily descriptions, it is as if Wright is describing some non-human being, his descriptions so off-putting and alarming.

The bus stopped and I stared down at a **bare-breasted young girl** who held a huge pan of oranges perched atop her head. She saw me studying her and she smiled shyly, obviously accepting her **semi-nudity as being normal**. My eyes went over the crowd and I noticed that most of the older women had **breasts that were flat and remarkably elongated**, some reaching twelve or eighteen inches (length, I was told later, was regarded as a symbol of fertility!), **hanging loosely and flapping** as the women moved about—and intuitively I knew that this **deformation** had been caused by the constant weight and pressure of babies sagging upon their backs and pulling the cloth that went across their bosoms.... (BP 59)

The roar came from all sides. **Gratitude showed in the eyes of those black faces** for the man who had taken their hand and told them that they had no need to fear the British, that they could laugh, sing, work, hope, and fight again. I was **astonished** to see **women, stripped to the waist, their elongated breasts flopping wildly**, do a sort of weaving, circular motion with their bodies, a kind of **queer** shuffling dance which expressed their joy in a quiet, physical manner. It was as if they were **talking with the movements of their legs, arms, necks, and torsos**; as if words were no longer adequate as a means of communication; as if sounds could no longer approximate their feelings; as if **only the total movement of their entire bodies could indicate in some measure their acquiescence, their surrender, their approval**. (BP 77)

The **parade or procession or whatever it was** called was rushing past me so rapidly that I feared that I would not get the photograph I wanted; I lifted my camera and tried to focus and when I did focus I saw a **forest of naked black breasts** before my eyes through the camera sight. I took the camera from my eyes, too **astonished** to act; passing me were about **fifty women, young and old, nude to the waist, their elongated breasts flopping loosely and grotesquely in the sun**. Their **faces were painted with streaks of white and sweat ran down their foreheads**. They held in each of their hands a short stick—taken from packing boxes—and they were knocking these sticks **furiously** together, setting up an **unearthly** clatter, their eyes fixed upon the revolving coffin of brass.... (BP 151)

## Morality Amongst the Locals

Morality is a theme commonly explored throughout the text. Not the morality of Wright

himself, but that of those whom he comes across. Yet, by extension, Wright is in a way questioning his own morality. The scenes he comes across often force him to challenge his preconceptions, and in this case, the moral code which he has been brought up with. Whether gender issues, sexuality, or something else, the question of what is and is not moral continues to crop up in what proves to be a confusing place for Wright.

Morals mentioned in the story seem to be tied around notions of sex. Encountering both supposed homosexuality and prostitution, Wright openly questions the morality of the things he sees, where the locals he interacts with views such acts as a normal part of the culture. Is it that Wright does not have the proper context for the things he is seeing? Wright's Western perspective may be clouding his judgment once again, to the point where he is wrongly interpreting the things he sees. In the following excerpt, Wright views two local men dancing at a local gathering, in a way he sees as inappropriate.

Then my eyes caught sight of **something that all but pulled me up out of my seat**. Two young men walked slowly across a corner of the dance floor, each with his arm **tenderly** about the waist of the other, their eyes holding a **contented, dreamy** gaze.... What was that? Had I **misjudged** the African **capacity** for the assimilation of Western emotional conditionings? But maybe those two boys were from Oxford or Cambridge...? They didn't look like it. **I wanted to question my friend about this, but I feared appearing too indelicate**. But, just as I **repressed my impetuosity**, the two young men glided gracefully out upon the dance floor and moved with all **the sexual suggestiveness of a mixed couple** to the catchy music. Again I **inhibited** myself, **not wishing to wade too abruptly into such matters with people whose reactions I could never predict**. After all, I was a **stranger** in a **strange** land. I sat quietly, watching, wondering. Had the British brought homosexuality to Africa? Had the **vices** of the English public-school system somehow seeped through here? Just as **the African** had taken **inordinately** to alcohol, had he taken to this too? Then I was startled to see two more young men, holding hands, walk leisurely across the dance floor, heading, it seemed, for the bar. A deep, calm togetherness seemed to exist between them. Was this more evidence of that innocence of instinct that I had previously observed? **I could no longer restrain my curiosity**. I leaned toward my host and whispered: "Look here. What's going on?" "I don't get you," he said; but I saw an **ironic twitch on his lips as he suppressed a smile**. "If what I see happening here tonight between young men happened in New York, the police would raid the place and throw the people in jail...." My friend **guffawed**. "What do you think you see?" he demanded. "I think I see some pretty overt homosexual behavior," I said quietly. "You don't," he said flatly. "Then what am I looking at?"

“You’re looking at **nice, manly tribal young men** who love dancing,” he explained in a somewhat aloof voice.

“Look, I’m no **moralist**; I don’t care what they are,” I said. “But I want to make sure.”

“And I’m making no **moral** defense of Gold Coast boys,” he said. “But you don’t see any homosexuality. Listen, I wanted you to come here to see this. I could have called your attention to it, but I was waiting for you to notice it—”

“How could I **escape** it?” I asked him. “Now, why are they acting like that?”

“It’s a bit complicated,” my host explained as the music jumped all over the dance floor. “These young boys are still mainly **tribal**. They speak English; they go to school, to church; and they work as clerks, perhaps, in European offices. But their deepest reactions are still basically **tribal**, not European. Now, in **tribal** dances men dance with men, women dance with women, or they all dance together, or each person alone, if he wants to.... Tribal dancing is not uniquely sexual. Sometimes they dance for a god, to please him, to coax him, to tell him something. Sometimes they dance to please each other. Long habituation to this kind of dancing makes them, when they dance in public to Western tunes and rhythms which are replete with sexuality, still follow their **tribal conditioning**. There is no homosexuality here. In most **tribal dancing** men get used to touching or holding other men; they think nothing of it; and they’d be **morally** shocked, hurt, if they thought that **you saw something perverse** in it. So you have here a **strange** synthesis of seemingly disparate elements—young boys dancing together, embracing ardently, holding hands, with no thought of sex. They are **brothers**.” (BP 129-131)

Several times the men are referred to as being tribal, in that they identify in this way before any other. The problem is, Wright doesn’t understand this tribal mentality. He can’t identify with the term, and makes little effort to do so. Instead, he sees the men by their gender, skin color, place of birth, age, etc., essentially all other identifiers outside of tribalism. Wright’s guide makes it a point to try to explain what he sees, but Wright still has fundamental issues understanding. Because he sees their gender before anything else, he attempts to assign them Western roles of appropriate sexuality, and by extension a sense of the Other, over any other identifier. This leads to Wright’s continued confusion to what he sees.

Though he claims not to be a moralist, he is prescribing morals. Wright sees what he takes as homosexuality, and is completely taken aback, until clarified repeatedly by his partner who is more knowledgeable on the situation unfolding before them. Even worse, Wright claims that he can’t “escape” what he sees before him. He is not in America, but instead in the land of the Other. There is no escape. Everywhere he turns serves as another stark reminder that Africa is not his

homeland.

Further moral issues are raised when addressing sex, specifically as Wright meets two upper-class African men on the boat to The Gold Coast, and becomes involved in some debauchery as the trio look for prostitutes. Wright distances himself from these men and their proclivities yet curiously still joins them in their ramblings. Other than the moral issues at hand, Wright also chooses to name the men Mr. Togoland and Mr. Justice, not bothering to learn or refer to them by their real names. Are these men not important enough to Wright for him to justify learning their names, or do they represent caricaturized versions of Africans?

I refused,” Mr. Justice said with **moral indignation**. “I never let anybody take me to places like that. Things like that are to be found by yourself. I pity the man who can’t find a woman.”  
I blinked, trying to keep abreast of his **strange moral** notions. Another African passenger joined us; he lived in the Gold Coast, but he’d been born in Togoland. I noticed that he was intimidated in the august presence of Mr. Justice, but he didn’t seem to mind me. I was an American and he knew that I drew no class lines. This chap—I’ll call him **Mr. Togoland**—was careful at all times to walk just a few steps behind **Mr. Justice**, not to interrupt him as he handed down his lofty opinions, and to pay deference to his every move. We hired a taxi. (BP 44-45)

The girls were excited at his **odd** behavior and wanted to know what he was laughing at. I shook my head, knowing that **moral subtleties** of that genre were much too **abstruse** for prostitutes, no matter how generous they were.

“You are a knockout,” Mr. Justice said to me, simpering.

“You are a killerdiller,” I told him.

“It’s wonderful being with you,” he said.

“The pleasure is all mine,” I said.

I knew that he was hotly longing to make a serious approach to one of the girls, but, out of deference to me — or was it the **moral** attitudes with which he had hemmed himself in during the past few days that was **inhibiting** him?—he was afraid to act and be himself. (BP 48)

Another occasion where Wright broaches the subject of morality is when mentioning the hotels in the area. Here another fundamental difference between Wright and African culture surfaces. For Africans, tribal based notions of taking care of each other’s extended family would preclude the usage of any hotel. Even a hotel’s existence would appear strange for tribal Africans, to the point of being immoral. Partially this is the case because as we’ve seen prior, for tribal Africans, travel



abroad is a foreign concept. Wright notes they are unable to sympathize with the traveler who does not have any tribal family to call his own. In this way Wright is ostracized once more because he does not have any tribal ties to his surroundings.

The hotel was owned by a Greek; there were three hotels in Accra and all of them were owned by foreigners. Africans seemed to have the notion that there was something **immoral** about a hotel, and when you explained to them how needful hotels were to travelers, to those who had no relatives, **they'd only smile or giggle**. Pride would have kept any African, if he had had the capital, from operating a hotel, even though he had a Western education from Oxford or Cambridge. **Living in tribal families, boasting "brothers" and "sisters" by the hundreds in far-flung towns and villages, an African had only to seek out his tribe to be housed, fed, and taken care of.** (BP 100)

To the local African, Wright is not only the foreigner, but he also represents a type of immorality according to his lodging choice. Wright claims Africans believe this so deeply, that even if they were educated elsewhere, they would not dare to operate a hotel. The local African disconnect from those who pass through (who are not considered tribal members) is an interesting, if limited perspective to hold. No consideration is given to those who are not members of the culture, and it takes outside investment to even facilitate visitors without tribal or family ties staying in the area. Here, Wright puts forth Africans as completely disinterested from helping to facilitate others, even African-Americans such as Wright. No distinction is drawn between Wright and other passers-through. They are one in the same.

### **Africa as Strange**

As Wright encounters the unknown during his time in The Gold Coast, oftentimes he quickly jumps to judge the things he sees before even making an attempt to fully comprehend what lies before him. More often than not, these judgments default to the negative, as much of what he sees is far different than what he is accustomed to. Wright commonly defaults to the word "strange," along with all of its negative connotation. As seen in the following excerpts, Wright

uses the term to describe several different aspects of what he sees, from the order of African life, to a reaction of drums, to workings of the mind, and even in general legal matters.

But the string of mud villages stretched out without end. My **protest** was not against Africa or its people; it was directed against the **unsettled feeling** engendered by the **strangeness** of a **completely different order of life**. I was gazing upon a world whose laws I did not know, upon faces whose **reactions were riddles to me**. There was nothing here that I could **predict, anticipate, or rely** upon and, in spite of myself, a **mild sense of anxiety began to fill me**. (BP 59)

“What are those drums?”

“You’ll find out,” she said, laughing.

“I feel **strange**; I see and hear so much that **I don’t understand**.”

“It’ll take you a few days to get into it,” she said. (BP 68)

It was **strange** how his mind seemed to prefer to deal with such **magical manifestations**. The African places **mystery** between cause and effect and there is a deep predilection toward omnipotence of thought, of spirit acting on spirit. The more I listened to Africans describe their achievements in the **realms of the magical**, the more I felt that it was how one related fact to fact that constituted the real difference between the Western and non-Western mind. When the chief had **saturated my understanding with mystery**, I launched into a discussion of politics where, I was certain, he could give me no facts tinged with **mysticism**. (BP 247-248)

The African attitude in legal matters is **strange**, one might almost say, idealistic. When he goes to law it is not only to obtain what he thinks is his right, but he wants that right done in a certain and particular manner. (BP 310)

In the first excerpt, Wright claims his “protest was not against Africa or its people”, instead “directed against the unsettled feeling engendered by the strangeness of a completely different order of life”. What is the reader to make of this split between the people and the life of the place? Does not one facilitate the other? The “riddles” Wright encounters, the “laws he did not know”, the lack of prediction and anticipation, they all are one with the people and culture of Africa. And while in one breath he says it is the world he does not know that causes his feelings of strangeness, in the last excerpt he directly contradicts this and calls “the African attitude in legal matters strange”! There is so much that Wright admits he doesn’t understand, yet he understands enough to deem it strange. Africa and Africans are the *strange* Other for Wright. The land, the people, their thought processes, the music, the culture, the mysticism, legal attitudes, all of these are beyond his comprehension. His mind is made up. They’re strange. And as such strange things,

they make him uncomfortable. They stir a “mild sense of anxiety,” a feeling of strangeness from within, and leave him “saturated with mystery”. One aspect builds into the next. Strangeness on top of strangeness, with no respite. Wright is a Western framed African-American, surrounded by the uncertainty that is all things Africa.

### **Identifying the Self**

#### **Wright’s Claims to African Heritage**

Wright often uses the word *heritage* when exploring some type of commonality between himself and the Africans he sees. At times it seems to be his default word when questioning some type of connection. If we look at heritage as something inherited, and belonging by birth, this may be the only thing Wright can point to as a commonality (along with skin color). Again, we come back to the idea of African in African-American. What exactly constitutes this African heritage is up for debate, and is openly pondered upon by Wright early in the memoir before he visits The Gold Coast.

I heard them, but my mind and feelings were racing along another and hidden track. *Africa!* Being of African **descent**, would I be able to feel and know something about Africa on the basis of a **common “racial” heritage**? Africa was a vast continent full of “**my people**.”...Or had three hundred years imposed a psychological distance between me and the “**racial** stock” from which I had sprung? (*BP* 23)

Some vestige, some **heritage**, some vague but definite **ancestral** reality that would serve as a key to unlock the hearts and feelings of the Africans whom I’d meet.... But I could not feel anything African about myself, and I wondered, “What does being African mean...?” (*BP* 23)

In Wright’s internal monologue, he asks many of the questions which have plagued African-Americans in the hundreds of years since leaving their homelands. Along with heritage, he uses other notable terms such as *descent*, *racial*, and *ancestral* to flush out the questions in his mind. These terms and adjoining line of questioning reflect deeper queries into the self. As seen throughout the text, these queries have no clear answer. Unfortunately for Wright, it is a

questioning which even at the end of the time spent in The Gold Coast, yields no clarity. Yet, Wright continues to draw on this term early in his time in The Gold Coast, specifically during an address at a political rally for Kwame Nkrumah.

“I’m one of the **lost sons** of Africa who has come back to look upon the land of **his forefathers**. In a superficial sense it may be said that I’m a **stranger** to most of you, but, in terms of a common **heritage** of **suffering and hunger** for freedom, **your** heart and **my** heart beat as **one**. (BP 96)

“This is indeed a **turgid, cloudy past**, a past not of **our** making or choosing; yet, despite all this, this **heritage** has brought **us** a sense of unity deeper than **race**, a sense of humanity that has made **us** sensitive to the sufferings of all mankind, that has made **us** increasingly human in a world that is rapidly losing its claim to humanity.... (BP 96)

Through attempts to find common ground with the people who he is addressing, Wright comes back to the only thing he can tangibly point to, that of shared African heritage. In labeling himself a lost son, he tries to claim the heritage which both sides share. He claims to be “back to look upon the land of his forefathers”, but would not those forefathers be the same as those he is addressing? Wright could conceivably use a first person plural pronoun here but curiously chooses not. Despite the lexical choice, he claims common heritage with the crowd of people who he has never met before and knows little about, while asserting that their heart beat as one. By the end of the speech, in the second excerpt above, Wright is really pressing the perceived connection. Repeated first person plural pronoun use peppers his speech, as he tries to draw himself closer to those in the crowd. This is a glimpse into the Wright who has not been humbled by repeated disjointed experiences as of yet. Unfortunately for him, as we see later in the full excerpt of this speech, his audacious claims are met with a tepid response.

## Wright’s Descent Driven Queries

### Pre-journey

If looking at how to define *descent* and *heritage*, the main difference between the two is

that heritage revolves more around traditions and culture passed from generation to generation, whereas descent more directly refers to one's bloodline and genetics. Previously, we examined *heritage* and how it applies (or does not) apply to Wright when it comes to Africans. His culture and traditions have differed radically than the Africans he meets, as they have been shaped by different influences over the centuries. Yet his descent, his bloodline, is not subject to the same manipulating factors, short of the induction of non-Africans into the bloodline. In other words, Wright is descended from Africans. They share a common descent. His blood ancestors are from the same physical location as Africans. Yet, crucially, they don't share a common heritage. As Wright ponders over the trip to The Gold Coast in the early stages of the memoir, he repeatedly reflects upon his descent, as seen in the following passages.

"Africa!" I repeated the word to myself, then paused as something **strange** and **disturbing** stirred slowly in the **depths** of me. I am African! I'm of African **descent**. . . . Yet I'd never seen Africa; I'd never really known any Africans; I'd hardly ever thought of Africa. . . . (BP 22)

I heard them, but my mind and feelings were racing along another and hidden track. *Africa!* Being of African **descent**, would I be able to feel and know something about Africa on the basis of a common "**racial**" **heritage**? Africa was a vast continent full of "my people." . . . Or had three hundred years imposed a psychological distance between me and the "**racial stock**" from which I had sprung? (BP 22-23)

The fortuity of birth had cast me in the "**racial**" role of being of African **descent**, and that fact now resounded in my mind with associations of hatred, violence, and death. Phrases from my childhood rang in my memory: one-half Negro, one-quarter Negro, one-eighth Negro, one-sixteenth Negro, one thirty-second Negro. . . . In thirty-eight out of the forty-eight states of the American Federal Union, marriage between a white person and a person of African **descent** was a criminal offense. To be of "**black**" blood meant being consigned to a lower plane in the social scheme of American life, and if one violated that scheme, one risked danger, even death sometimes. And all of this was predicated upon the presence of **African blood** in one's veins. **How much of me was African?** Many of my defensive-minded Negro friends had often told me with passion: "**We** have a special gift for music, dancing, rhythm and movement. . . . **We** have a genius of our own. **We** were **civilized** in Africa when white men were still living in caves in Europe. . . ." (BP 25)

"Now, you take the racial expression of the Negro. . . ."

And I'd looked off uneasily, wondering what they meant. I was accounted as being of **African**, that is, **Negro**, **descent**, but what were these "**racial**" qualities that I was supposed to possess? While in the presence of those who talked confidently of "**racial**" qualities, I would listen and mull over their phrases, but no sooner had they gone than my mind would revert to my habitual kind of thinking that had no "**race**" in it, a kind of thinking that was conditioned by the reaction of human beings to a concrete social environment. And I'd ask myself: "What are they talking about?" (BP 25-26)

Wright's American descent is much easier to identify with than that of Africa. He was born and raised in Mississippi, largely among Americans, albeit during a very tumultuous time for African-Americans. These are the experiences which helped to shape and get him to the point where he is before traveling to The Gold Coast. But his African descent has not been explored fully. He does not know any of his African family. He does not know how his long ago ancestors lived. He notes as much in the first excerpt, never seeing, knowing, or thinking of the continent. If this is the case, what does the African descent really mean? Is it just a footnote in an otherwise American, Western based life? Despite this lack of knowledge and awareness, he claims something "strange and disturbing stirred slowly in the depths of me". What exactly is stirring within Wright? Bloodlines? An expected reaction? Perhaps whatever the African in African-American consists of. Though he has no frame of reference for Africa, this unknown part within him has stirred upon discussing a trip there. Once more, in a problematic fashion, identifying the cause of this stirring beyond just attributing it to Africa is not possible.

As Wright continues to question Africa, he openly wonders if his common "racial stock" will help to "feel and know" more about Africa than the normal traveler. After all, it is a continent full of "his people", as they are one in the same. But Wright's use of the first-person possessive pronoun in "my people" in quotations relays his skepticism about the bond. It may have been what he's been told in the past and is a somewhat common refrain amongst those not knowledgeable about the true state of relations between the two sides. Wright is not oblivious of the differences that may lie between the two, developed over 300 years of separation. However he doesn't show any certainty either way. He's left to speculate on his positioning there before actually making his way to the continent. Furthermore, he elaborates on the way in which

America defines the African in African-American, citing the fractions of descent which would label one as an African-American per the U.S. government when any African blood would be held against the person. To be of black descent in America is not the same as being of black descent in Africa. In fact, the terms are mutually exclusive for the most part. The weight of black blood in America is held against a person. It identifies them as the other in their own country. Yet when they go to the place where the heritage of black blood is shared, they are still denied as a foreigner, because the black blood does not have the same implications.

Finally, as discussed elsewhere, Wright doesn't really subscribe to notions of race, and the commonalities which are supposed to accompany them. So even when his African-American peers reference African, racial, and Negro qualities, Wright disputes them internally. He distances himself from their statements about these commonalities, and therefore positions himself away from them, essentially standing alone somewhere in between Africa and America. In the end, his African heritage counts for little in Africa, and is counted against him in America!

### **Wright's Early Speech at a Nkrumah Rally**

Early on in Wright's time in The Gold Coast, he has an opportunity to address the masses via a political rally on behalf of Kwame Nkrumah. This is Wright's first time really talking with the common African people, and it deserves further examination for particular noun, pronoun, verb and adjective use. First, Wright frames himself as a "lost son of Africa". Judging by the audience's lackluster response to his words, they do not seem to agree. His lexical choice here reflects a plea of sorts to establish camaraderie and connection between the speaker and his audience. Laying the groundwork for commonality early in the speech would potentially allow Wright to forge a connection later on, the usefulness of which can be debated, and then make observations on the

current local push for freedom and self-independence. This commonality opens the door for Wright to make these assertions he would otherwise not be in a position to make, though the perception he can actually do so resonates only within his mind.

**My** turn came to greet the audience and **I** rose and spoke **somewhat** as follows:

“Men of Ghana: Your **great** and **respected** Prime Minister has extended to **me** an invitation to see **your** country, **its** people, and the rapid rate of development that **you** are making. It is with pride that **I’ve** come to look upon the labor of a man who attended **our** American schools and who has dedicated **his** life to the **struggle** for the freedom of **his** country.

“**I’m one of the lost sons of Africa** who has come back to look upon the land of his **forefathers**. In a superficial sense it may be said that I’m a **stranger** to most of you, but, in terms of a **common heritage of suffering and hunger for freedom, your heart and my heart beat as one**.

“Centuries ago the living bodies of **our forefathers** were **dragged** from these shores and sold into slavery; centuries ago the bodies of **our forefathers** formed the living instruments which the white men of Europe used to build the foundations of the Western world; centuries ago **we** were reduced to nameless, stateless pawns shuffled by the will of Europeans and Americans across the chessboards of history; centuries ago **our tribes were so mauled, mixed, and scattered** that **we** could not even speak to one another in a common tongue.

“This is indeed a **turgid, cloudy past**, a past not of **our** making or choosing; yet, despite all this, this heritage has brought **us** a sense of **unity deeper than race, a sense of humanity that has made us sensitive to the sufferings of all mankind, that has made us increasingly human in a world that is rapidly losing its claim to humanity....**

“Under the leadership of your Leader, the Convention People’s Party has roused immense interest throughout America and the world at large. **You men are, of all the teeming millions of Africa**, the first to step upon the political stage of the twentieth century. What **you** do will have consequences that will roll down the years. What **you** achieve in the coming months will to a large degree define the character of the coming **struggle for the redemption of Africa**.

“Today, in **your** struggle for self-government, **you** are presenting to the men of England a political promissory note which the English have declared to be the real moral currency of mankind, and now the world is watching to see if the English will honor their own currency! They asked **you** to build political parties, and you did! But **you** did it so much quicker than they thought **you** could! **You** are making your bid for freedom in terms which your teachers in England and America told **you** were correct. Now, in your struggle for self-government, **you** are presenting for redemption a promise made to **you** by the heart of England. Will she honor it? The world is waiting to see....

“From **the 30,000,000 sons and daughters of African descent** in the New World, both in North and South America, and in the many islands of the Atlantic, **I bring you deep-felt greetings**.

“**I am an American and therefore cannot participate in your political affairs. But I wish you victory in your bid for freedom! Ghana, show us the way! The only advice that I can give you is two thousand years old and was uttered by a Man Whose name is frequently used but Whose moral precepts millions choose to ignore. To a great and despoiled Africa, to an Africa awakening from its slumber, to an Africa burning with hope, I advise you: TAKE UP YOUR BED AND WALK!**”

**The handclapping was weak and scattered.** Perhaps they were not used to hearing speakers who did not raise their voices, or maybe they had not understood...? I sat. (*BP* 95-97)

Wright’s pronoun choices are worth a thorough examination. He starts with the first person *me* and *I*, briefly detailing to the crowd how he finds himself in The Gold Coast. But the speech sharply



changes with the pronoun usage shifting into the second person plural *your*, when he claims, “I am one of the lost sons of Africa (...) I’m a stranger to most of you, but, in terms of a common heritage of suffering and hunger and freedom, your heart and my heart beat as one”. Here is the metaphorical rope Wright throws out to locals in the crowd. It is his sales pitch to the African people. They both share a heritage of oppression and a yearning for independence. This is the common ground that Wright concludes they both occupy. In this way, they are the same side, on the same team, waging the same struggle, just against different oppressors. They’re strong words with a strong message for his first address to the people of Africa. Then, delving into a brief summary of slavery, the first person plural pronouns *our*, *we*, and *us* come out in droves. Terms such as “our forefathers” (2x), “we were reduced”, “our tribes”, “we could not speak”, “a past not of our making”, and “heritage has brought us a sense of unity”, stake the claim that Wright stands together with his fellow African-blooded brethren. Though he doesn’t know it yet, this is a vast overgeneralization.

Finally, after urging on the push for independence, Wright speaks for the 30,000,000 members of the diaspora in his “deep-felt greetings”. It appears to be quite the leap of faith that Wright can speak for such a large group. Wright sounds like more of an ambassador for the African diaspora than a writer trying to find out what Africa and its people mean to him. At this point he is getting a little carried away with himself, possibly caught up in a personally significant moment.

The sense of excitement put forth by Wright is more evident in his last words, as he quotes no other than Jesus Christ from the Gospel of John in The Bible imploring the people before him to lay claim to their own land and assert what’s rightfully theirs with a bold tone. Such a thunderous closing should surely have the crowd on their feet and throbbing with passion, especially owing to

the rally itself, which was held in support of soon-to-be President Kwame Nkrumah. Yet Wright notes their reaction was “weak and scattered”. Tellingly, he attributes this to a lack of understanding, or misconstrued loud orators, though throughout the book we hear booming freedom chants regularly. Possibly the tepid response is due to the biblical reference missing the mark with the largely tribal-based society. Also likely is that his message has not resonated with the crowd, to the point of potential confusion for the audience. Those in attendance draw no distinction between Richard Wright and any other non-African. What they see is that a Westerner, based in America, has tried to tie himself in with their long-standing plight. But as a Westerner first and foremost, he is able to do no such thing.

### **Dismay in the Gold Coast**

Having left America with no firm footing on how to answer his lingering questions of what descent really means to him, the term continued to prove problematic during his time in The Gold Coast. Just as with skin color, he continually harkens back to this shared commonality with Africans. Somehow, someway, that his bloodlines trace to Africa is supposed to count towards a kinship, or at the very least, some common ground to stand on with a group of people who share the same bloodline. Time and again however, this is not the case. Each of the excerpts below detail brief interactions, while dwelling on themes of descent, and are notable for their overall negative and defeatist nature.

The **bafflement** evoked in me by this new reality did not spring from any desire to disclaim **kinship** with Africa, or from any shame of being of African **descent**. My problem was how to account for this “survival” of Africa in America when I stoutly denied the **mystic** influence of “**race**,” when I was as certain as I was of being alive that it was only, by and large, in the concrete social frame of reference in which men lived that one could account for men being what they were. I **sighed**; this was truly a big **problem**.... **Restless**, I sought the streets of Accra just to look at **Africa**. (BP 87)

I’m of African **descent** and I’m in the midst of Africans, yet **I cannot tell what they are thinking and feeling**. And, without the help of either the British or the Africans, I’m completely **immobilized**. Africa

**sprawls** far inland and my walking jaunts about Accra are no way to see this life. Yet, I cannot just take a train or a bus and go; the more I ask about jungle conditions, the more I'm **dismayed**. (BP 158)

When something struck me as being **strange**, I erupted with questions; when something seemed funny, I laughed; and when I was curious, I dived headlong to uncover the **obscurities**.... Moreover, being **obviously of African descent**, I looked like the Africans, but I had only to walk upon a scene and **my difference** at once declared itself without a word being spoken. (BP 159)

Wright is “baffled”, “restless”, “immobilized”, and “dismayed”, witnessing “strange obscurities” and facing a “truly big problem”. His continued marked adjective usage points to a man in a state of uncertainty with his surroundings, and subsequently a sense of frustration in his inability to find meaningful connections with the continent or its people. He continues reminding himself that he is indeed of African descent, and thusly should be able to parlay this into something more. But little comes of it. What does come from these pursuits is that Wright sees some similarities between African-Americans and Africans, most notably when dancing, as referenced in the first excerpt. But he denies racial influences, calling them “mystic”. So what then to make of these similarities? And what to make of the differences? Increasingly, when identifying the self and positioning the Other, more questions than answers appear. Wright’s frustration is palpable in his lexical choices.

I was still in the **dark as to how the African mind functioned** and I wanted to come to closer grips with it. I appealed at last to a white missionary, Lloyd Shirer, telling him that I wanted to ask an African, a cook or a houseboy, his beliefs. Mr. Shirer worked for the Department of Welfare in the Northern Territories and knew the Gold Coast well, having spent some thirty years in the “bush.” **He told me that what his cook could tell me would relate only to his cook’s part of the country, that is, the North, but that the basic psychological reactions were mostly the same everywhere.** Since Mr. Shirer spoke the language, he promised me a word-by-word translation.

“Come to dinner tonight, and after we’ve eaten, I’ll call in the cook and you can ask him anything you want,” he said.

I went to dinner and, after we had eaten, Mr. Shirer called in his cook. He was a tall man of about forty, jet black, slightly bald and skinny. Mr. Shirer told him that I was an American of African **descent**, that I’d come back to see **the land of my ancestors**, that I wished to ask him about his life. **He had been a little nervous, but now he smiled**, sat on a little stool, and nodded. (BP 215-216)

“Now, look at me. You can see from the color of my skin that I’m of **African descent**. Now, after all of these years, why do you think I’ve come back to the land of my **ancestors**? Do you think that they called me back for some reason?”

Again the tall, serious cook was deeply thoughtful; he scratched his head and said **soberly**: “It’s hard to tell, sar. Such a long time has passed.”

He looked at me and shook his head **pityingly**.

“I’m afraid, sar, that your ancestors do not know you now. If your ancestors knew you, why, they’d help you. And, of course, it may be that your **ancestors** know you and you don’t know them, **so much time has passed**, you see, sar. Now if, by accident, you happened to go back into the section where your **ancestors** are buried, they’d perhaps know you but you wouldn’t know them. Now, if, while you are in Africa, your **ancestors** should recognize you, then something **strange** will happen to you and then, by that token, you’d know that you were in touch with your **ancestors**.”

“What sort of **strange** thing would happen to me?”

“It’s hard to tell, sar,” he said.

(.....)

He entered again, wiping his hands on his apron. The question was put to him by Mr. Shirer and the cook answered:

“Oh, that’s easy, sar. My son would take me back and bury me in the land of my ancestors.”

“But what if your son were not here?” I suggested **relentlessly**.

That one **bothered** him. He studied the floor for some minutes, and then he said: “Then my friends would bury me and then they’d watch my grave for those black ants who are called God’s slaves. Now, you take one of those ants when he is crawling over my grave, wrap that ant in a bundle of three stones, and then take that bundle to the land where my ancestors are buried and bury it and my soul will be there. I’ll be with my ancestors then.”

**These, of course, are but dreams, daylight dreams, dreams dreamed with the eyes wide open!** Was it that the jungle, so rich, so fertile, was it that life, so warm, so filled with ready food, so effortless, prompted men to dream dreams like this? Or was it the opposite? These dreams belong to **the African**; they existed before the coming of the white man.... One thing was certain: **their sense of reality was but a dream**. It may be, of course, that dreams are the staunchest kind of reality.... It may be that such beliefs fit the soul of man better than railroads, mass production, wars.... And **the African** is not alone in holding that these dreams are true. All men, in some form or other, love these dreams. Maybe men are happier when they are wrapped in warm dreams of being with their fathers when they die...? (*BP* 218-220)

Wright’s limited knowledge of what he encounters is not due to a lack of trying, though these efforts are often grounded in misguidance and misinformation. He does occasionally seek out locals in order to get more perspective on matters, but the answers are generally not forthcoming, if they even exist at all. Wright does have connections to some higher class members of African society (some white, some black), who in turn have connections to the more common people that Wright can probe for answers. In the excerpt above, Wright relies on a white, Western missionary for a contact into the local world, as the missionary assures Wright that even though the worker is from the North, “basic psychological reactions were mostly the same everywhere”. This overgeneralization points to fundamental flaws in the perspective of the Westerner, but

Wright buys into it. Why wouldn't he? Wright is more familiarly oriented with him than with the locals.

Once face to face with the local cook, Wright is blunt when it comes to his line of questioning. He establishes commonalities with the man, citing his skin (which Wright feels marks him as one with African descent) and asks him a personal line of questions that surely the cook has little frame of reference to answer. Not only that, but in asking if his ancestors called him back to Africa, Wright is using a Westerner to gain access to a local to ask him questions from the Western perspective, yet undoubtedly the mysticism tinted queries will be responded to through the African lens. No answer available from the cook will suffice Wright's inquiries. The experience is another in a long list of misguided attempts to identify himself through the filter of others.

Additionally, in the passage the reader gets a rare glimpse into how the local African man is visibly affected by Wright's line of questioning. At first he was "nervous" but eased a bit as Wright has the liaison frame him as an "American of African descent", who had "come back to see the land of my ancestors". Not shared ancestors, but Wright's alone, as designated by the first person pronoun *my*. The local man relaxes a bit upon hearing this, but during the dialogue speaks "soberly", "shook his head pityingly", and upon "relentless" direct questioning by Wright, delves into "bothered" thought on the topic of discussion. The local cook laments for Wright and his plight, as much as he can relate to it from a distance. This is especially so in relation to ancestral burial customs, where the cook feels Wright (and other African-Americans) have seen so much time pass that they may be lost forever. Finally, Wright dismisses the notions as a dream, not openly letting the man's reactions affect him too deeply, but driving Wright

further down the rabbit hole of thought.

### **Final Reflections to Kwame Nkrumah**

The memoir ends with a long letter written to Kwame Nkrumah, the soon to be president of what will become Ghana. In his correspondence, Wright reminisces about his time spent in The Gold Coast as a final reflection on the experience. Descent comes to the forefront for a final occurrence, in two different contexts. He first romanticizes some of his experiences, at least when comparing them to some of the language seen throughout the memoir, when Wright is more often confused and puzzled by what he sees more than anything else. He claims an “at-homeness” and “solidarity” was felt mostly because of the struggle Africans have experienced in the face of their European colonizers. Is this finally the connection Wright can put together? Have Africans faced many of the same difficulties from European whites that African-Americans have faced with American whites? While he tries to make this connection, Wright steadfastly admits that no “solidarity that stemmed from ties of blood or race, or from being of African descent”. Has he finally conceded this was simply a pipe-dream, and found the next best connection? At the very least, it is a curious sentiment put forth in a departure where he repeatedly tried to forge this sense of togetherness.

While roaming at random through the compounds, market places, villages, and cities of your country, **I felt an odd kind of at-homeness, a solidarity that stemmed not from ties of blood or race**, or from my being of **African descent**, but from the quality of deep hope and suffering embedded in the lives of your people, from the hard facts of oppression that cut across time, space, and culture. I must confess that I, an American Negro, was filled with **consternation** at what Europe had done to this Africa.... (BP 371)

On the other hand, I cannot, as a man of **African descent** brought up in the West, recommend with good faith the agitated doctrines and promises of **the hard-faced men of the West**. Kwame, until they have set their own houses in order with their own restless populations, until they have solved their racial and economic problems, they can never—no matter what they may say to you at any given moment!—deal honestly with you. Given the opportunity, they’ll pounce at any time upon Africa to solve their own hard-pressing social and political problems, just as you well know that they have pounced in the past. (BP 373-74)

Finally, he issues a warning to Nkrumah about the “hard-faced men of the West”, of which the argument could be made that Wright himself is one and the same! Surely he is much closer to that than a local African, based on experiences throughout the memoir. Possibly Wright is warning of the same mindset which has infiltrated him during his Western upbringing. Wright occupies the middle ground again between the two sides, distancing himself from the men seemingly determined to plunder the continent for their own gain, while commenting as an outsider. Perhaps this is as apt an ending as can be in the face of Wright’s failures. Beware the men and the culture which spawned Wright himself, and embrace the African spirit which has eluded him throughout his Gold Coast journey.

## Chapter 5 - Conclusion

### Discussion

The overriding purpose of this study was to determine how Richard Wright, in his travel memoir *Black Power*, used language to identify himself, and position Africa and Africans during his time spent in The Gold Coast. To accomplish that goal I used a Systemic Functional Linguistic approach to the text (itself a branch of Critical Discourse Analysis), identifying nouns, adjectives, pronouns, articles and collocations in order to further examine relations between Wright and the Africans he meets, affective involvement showing the impact of African experiences on Wright (and occasionally his effects on those he encounters), contact via the way he interacted with them, and orientation to affiliation in the attempted process to connect with Africans and their continent in large part due to a shared ancestry.

Wright was rarely, if ever, seen as a countryman to those he encountered. He was an outsider, no different than any other Westerner, black or otherwise. However, how much of this was Wright's own doing? Did he even give Africa a chance, or did he simply cast it as the Other before the same happened to him? His lexical choices suggest that Africa deeply affected him in a negative fashion nearly immediately when arriving, a culture shock of sorts, which was then exacerbated by further events which took place. Take the following example early in the memoir as one of the first instances of Wright's clear condescension upon being overwhelmed.

The kaleidoscope of sea, jungle, nudity, mud huts, and crowded market places induced in me a conflict deeper than I was aware of; a protest against what I saw seized me. As the bus rolled swiftly forward I waited irrationally for these fantastic scenes to fade; I had the foolish feeling that I had but to turn my head and I'd see the ordered, clothed streets of Paris....But the string of mud villages stretched out without end. My protest was not against Africa or its people; it was directed against the unsettled feeling engendered by the strangeness of a completely different order of life. I was gazing upon a world whose laws I did not



know, upon faces whose reactions were riddles to me. There was nothing here that I could predict, anticipate, or rely upon, and in spite of myself, a mild sense of anxiety began to fill me. (*BP* 65)

Just onto Africa, Wright's first reaction was to try and distance the land and its people from the combined chaos of the sea, jungle, nudity, mud villages, and crowds. Problematically, there is no separation. This is The Gold Coast, and for Wright's (and our) purposes, Africa. Wright's been so indoctrinated in both the American and European ways of the world that whether this scene played out in Africa or elsewhere the reaction would likely be the same. However, because it is in Africa, this chaos combined with the cloudy memorialized and mystic properties attributed to the continent beforehand set the stage for what is to come and subsequently taints the rest of the trip and most of the experiences involved. There was no warming up period for Richard Wright. He was thrown straight into Africa, and in this way never stood a chance.

As a direct result of the lack of orientation to not only his physical surroundings, but also the people themselves, there were no avenues for affiliation available for Wright to even build up to. From the start, matters were bound to be difficult for him, as he came with a great deal of uncertainty about what Africa and his own Africanness actually meant, before even setting foot on the continent.

With an uncertainty about his own identity, Wright first strove to define and identify Africa and the Africans around him, which conceivably would then lead to his being able to identify himself. Besides other problems with this approach, within the context of the memoir the main issue was that Wright didn't like what he saw. He saw a distant, primitive, dark, immoral, strange society that bore scant resemblance to anything he could relate with. Even when he did find a commonality in movement and dancing, he couldn't fully embrace it because

it was not to his liking.

After seeing for himself apparently what Africa and its people had to offer, the question remained of how Wright himself fit in to this culture and society. And because of all the negative attributes hung on the land and its people, he didn't want anything to do with it. So, he positioned them as far away from himself as possible, and meanwhile was stuck with the dilemma of his own bloodlines and Africanness. Whether through heritage, ancestry, descent, or even posing the question to locals, Wright left without an answer, as there was seemingly none to his liking which would allow him to reconcile himself with the perceived chaos before him.

What I continued to find in the text throughout this study were repeated instances of a man in a world very different from his, and subsequently not willing, or able to release preconceived and stereotypical notions about Africa and its people. Additionally, the mental, emotional, and spiritual metaphorical baggage that many African-Americans harbor about Africa was not put to the side in order to report his findings in as unbiased a way as possible. Perhaps this was a shortcoming of Wright himself, or perhaps African-Americans in general are too involved to remain objective. Further analysis of other African-American travel writing would shed some light on this question. If being honest with himself, I do not even think Wright could tell you what would have constituted a successful trip. Expectations were clouded in uncertainty, though they tended to default to some sort of welcoming. This effort was bound to fall short for a multitude of reasons.

In large part, these shortcomings can be attributed to an erroneous frame of reference coming into the continent of Africa. During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, African development was even

more drastically behind than that in America today, and previous knowledge of Africa was at a minimum for many travelers. In what was quickly becoming a globalized society, the Africa Wright experience was only in the very early stages of shedding some of its tribal roots, showing continued resistance of a lot of what had become considered standard societal norms in America. The differences were too stark for many like Wright to comprehend. And with a past as convoluted as the African-American African relationship, these differences only further served to illustrate the problematic nature of going back to Africa and reclaiming one's sense of African heritage and ancestry.

## **Conclusions**

Wright came to The Gold Coast full of uncertainty about what exactly was going to take place, and what he would encounter during his time there. This uncertainty, wrapped around centuries of forced division from Africa and his long ago countrymen, created a maelstrom of emotions which poured out across a wide variety of interactions and internal reflections. Though Wright frequently tried to put himself among the locals in a variety of physical, class-based, and gendered settings, more often than not these attempts failed to gain any traction towards whatever it was he was looking for.

Wright's critical language use against Africans in framing them as the Other goes against the "scientific ethnography" approach Wright stated he would use in examining the continent in the preface to *Black Power*, "Appropos Possessions". Though he claimed to be using a discerning eye in surveying his surroundings, this was quickly and evidently abandoned in short order as Appiah (1988) concurred when he noted Wright's claim was tossed aside as soon as the

first chapter, when he inwardly and outwardly ponders the particulars of his trip. From that point forward, Wright the unbiased observer is gone, replaced by Wright the subjective, critical African-American Westerner. Whether the actual dialogue he has with Africans to the internal monologue he has with himself, he is full of contradictions and defeatist ideologies that permeate his every sense of being as he stayed in The Gold Coast.

I believe that things would be quite different in modern times for current travel writers. Though many of the same historical issues remain, global access to information is at an all-time high, and the world is more connected and multicultural than at any point in human history. Knowledge, understanding, and compassion go a long way in cutting through the thicket of historical events and bridging the two sides together. It would be interesting to look at more recent accounts of travel literature to Africa and see how the language used (and issues raised) varies.

## **Recommendations**

The key terms examined here could also be used to look at other pieces of African-American travel literature for similarities and differences in the way they are used. These interactions themselves could be examined and looked at as examples on how to try to further understanding between the two sides. The terms and interactions could be collectively further expounded upon in school systems, both stateside and abroad, to further demystify African-American African relations, so that future generations can work through and unpackage much of the same strife which plagued Wright, African-Americans, and Africans.

The Systemic Functional Linguistic approach, with a focus on tenor, specifically

examines aspects of the interaction and fallout of two groups of people. This approach could also be used for other travel literature as well, as was my original plan to do so with Wright and Maya Angelou. Their pragmatism versus mysticism was on full display in their respected writings. Both encountered many of the same social issues while in The Gold Coast/Ghana, yet Angelou's *All God's Children Wear Traveling Shoes* ends on a much higher note (for some, suspiciously too feel-good) for the author than does Wright's *Black Power*. Gender perspectives could also be raised and examined for language similarities and differences.

As noted earlier, it may also be useful to examine travel narratives of the past, and compare them to more modern accounts. Educational shortcomings aside, the wealth of knowledge available to any would-be traveler would possibly allow for a greater sense of orientation upon arrival, which could then lead to affiliation with the land, the people, and the culture. Travel today has changed drastically than even five or ten years ago, let alone 65 years ago. So it would be quite interesting to see how a better prepared traveler would react.

We should also note the development of Africa itself in the last 65 years, as it's a markedly different place than when Wright went. In an increasingly globalized world, Africa has developed accordingly in many respects. In this way, the shock might also be dulled for travelers.

Finally, a last thread worth examining would be to really deconstruct the term African in African-American in the context of today's Africa with nearly 55 different countries and countless more distinct cultures and languages within them. As noted in the delimitations, using the term Africa/n so liberally paints the continent with an unjustifiably broad brush that does not

reflect the diversity of the land and its people. While Wright's experience in The Gold Coast (now Ghana) may not have been the most fruitful, others since may have had markedly different experiences based on different cultures and traditions encountered. Both in the past and now, this could provide rich avenues for future research.

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